

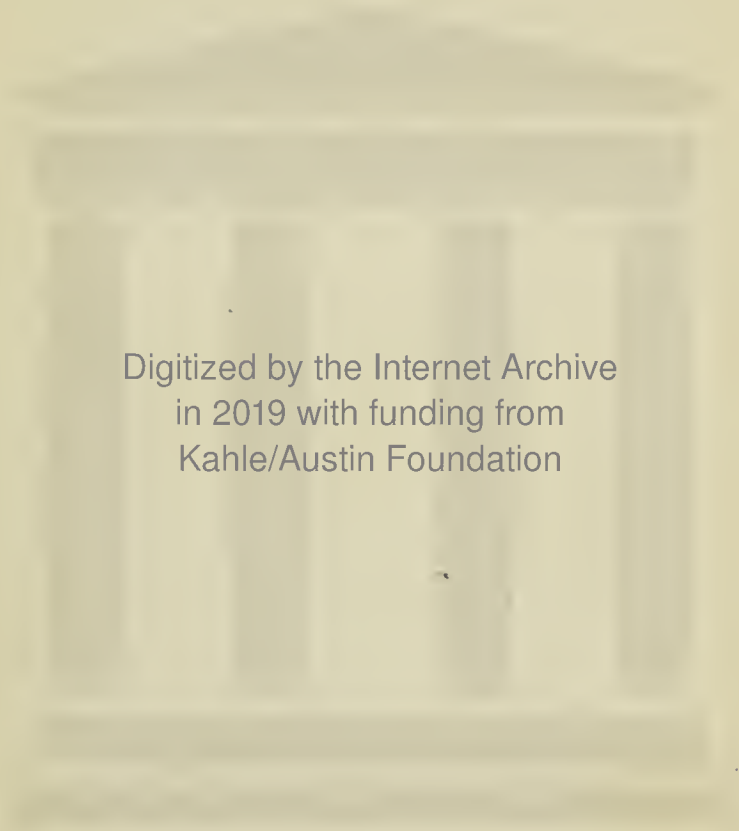


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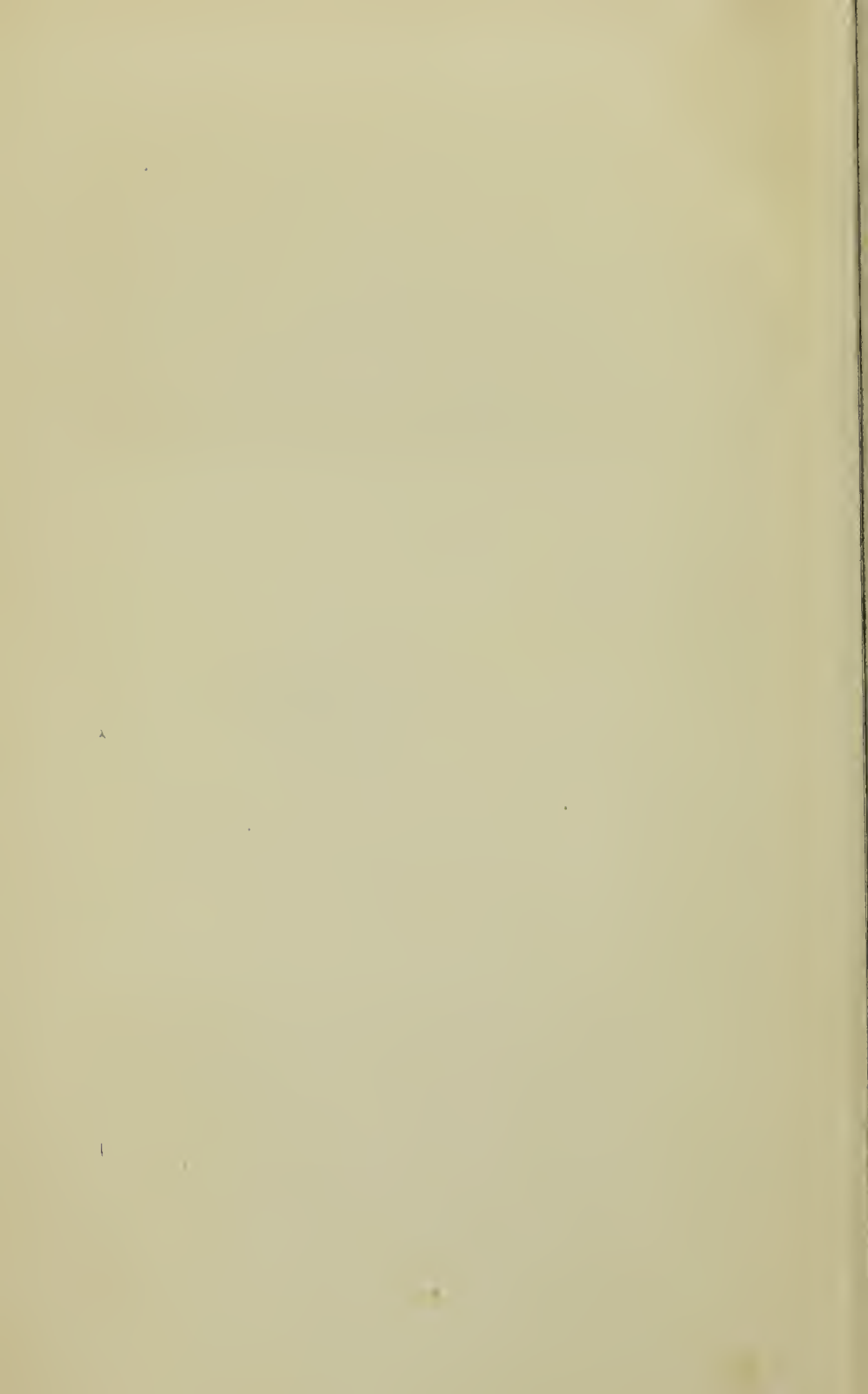
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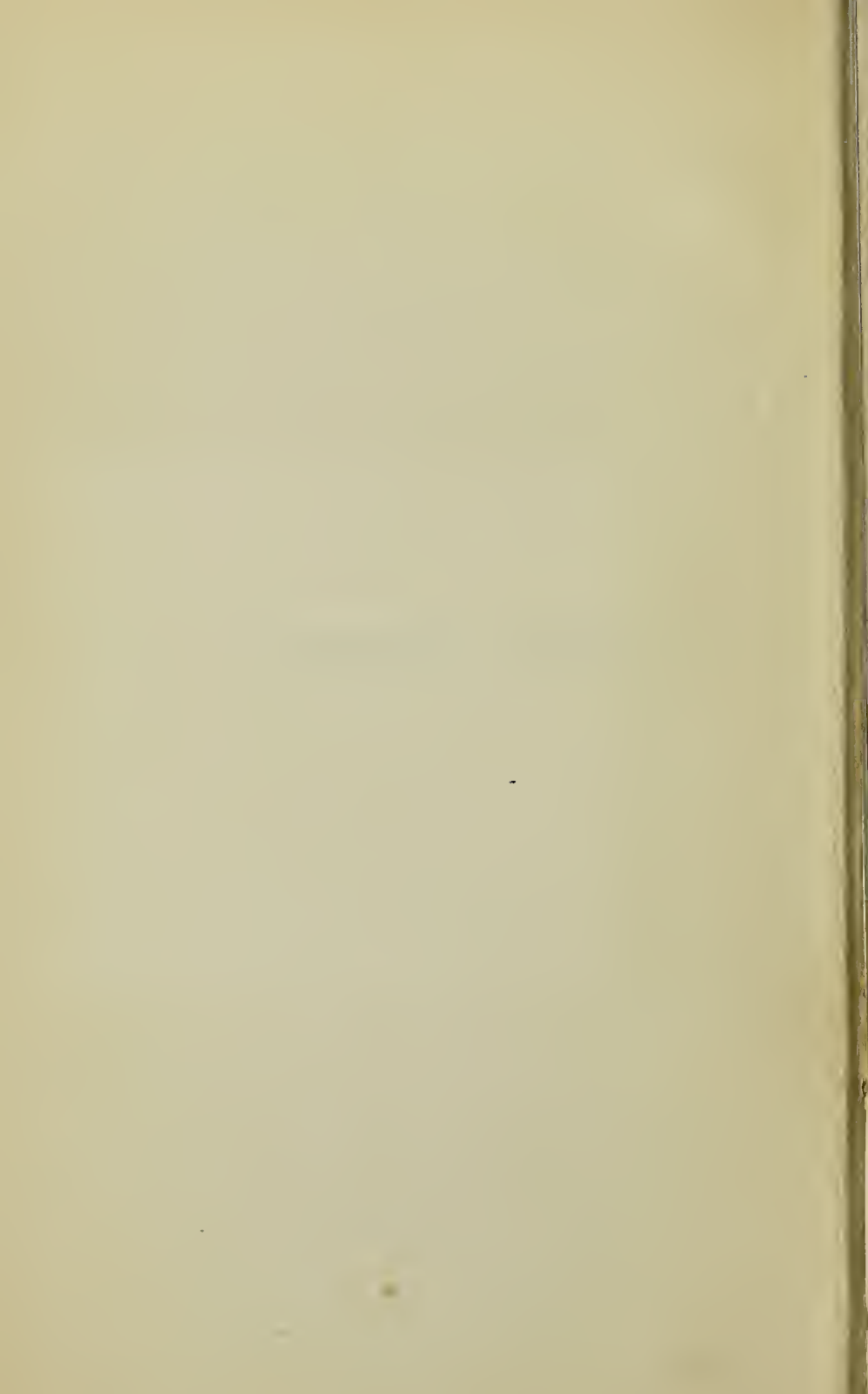


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GEORGE MEREDITH







Charles F. Smith

Gretton, Mary Sturge  
...

GEORGE MEREDITH  
NOVELIST POET  
REFORMER

BY  
MAY STURGE HENDERSON

WITH A FRONTISPIECE

SECOND EDITION

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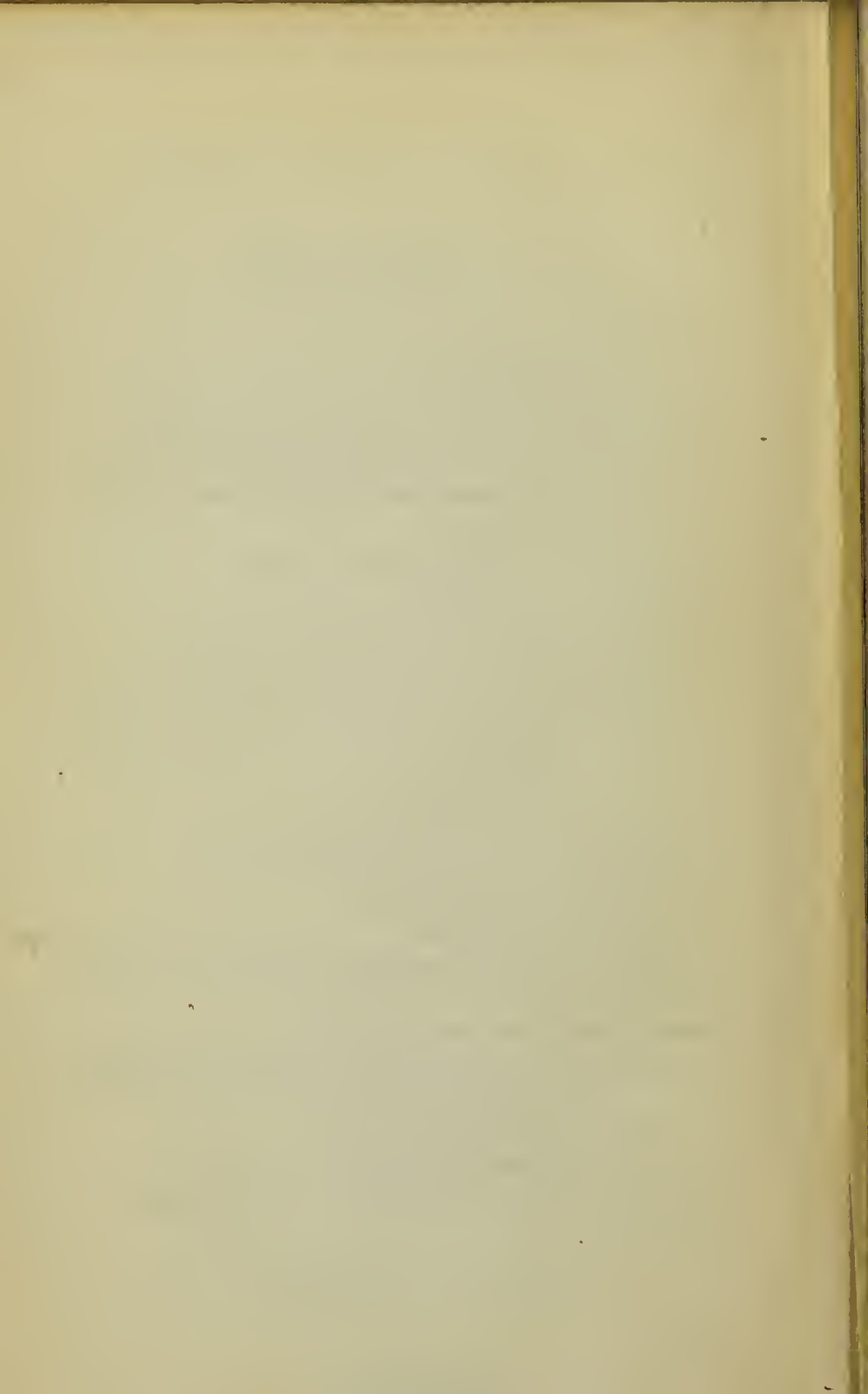
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*The frontispiece is from a photograph by Mr. F. Hollyer*





## PREFACE

CHAPTERS XIV to XVII of this book, in which Meredith's Poetry is considered, are the work of my friend Mr. Basil de Sélincourt.

To Miss Anne Douglas Sedgwick I am deeply grateful for the encouragement she has given me, and for the material underlying one of my chapters. My brother, Mr. Charles Sturge, has kindly provided me with an index. My thanks are due to Colonel Maxse for information regarding *Beauchamp's Career*, and to Miss G. Ostler, Mrs. B. de Sélincourt, and the Reverend James McKechnie for assistance in various ways. Last, as first, must stand my indebtedness to Mr. Meredith, of which this book, inadequate as it is, is the only possible acknowledgment.



# GEORGE MEREDITH

## NOVELIST POET REFORMER

### CHAPTER I

#### INTRODUCTION

“WHEN at the conclusion of your article on my works you say that a certain change in public taste, should it come about, will be to some extent due to me, you hand me the flowering wreath I covet. For I think that all right use of life and the one secret of life, is to pave ways for the firmer footing of those who succeed us; and as to my works I know them faulty, think them of worth only where they point and aid to that end. Close knowledge of our fellows, discernment of the laws of existence, these lead to great civilisation. I have supposed that the novel exposing and illustrating the history of man may help us to such sustaining roadside gifts.” These words, from a private letter of George Meredith’s to the author of an article in the *Harvard Monthly*, contain the creed on which the whole of his voluminous writing has been based. Imaginatively developed in the Introduction to *Diana of the Crossways* and elsewhere, it is his plea for a kind of fiction which, in prose and in verse, he may almost be said to have brought into existence.

But Meredith is not an author only : he is also a critic, and a critic of an unusually penetrative kind. The *Essay on Comedy* is universally recognised as a lasting contribution to literature ; and from his articles in the *Fortnightly Review*, for the year 1868 alone, the truth may be gleaned as to the quality and range of his literary judgment. He had suffered too acutely himself at the hands of reviewers to be in any danger of dismissing young writers' work on the grounds of mere personal distaste. His criticism is singularly sympathetic and appreciative, but it is more. It is related to the possibilities of his art and its whole body of achievement : it abounds in illustrations drawn from the masters of literature. From these writings it is obvious that Meredith possesses a very delicate power of literary discrimination, and any consideration of his achievement must be based on a recognition of this, in spite of the fact that he has laid himself open to the charge of being prolix and uneclectic in his work. The truth is that his great and multiform activity has obscured the single-mindedness of his impulse, and it is this single-mindedness which needs to be recognised afresh by those who would estimate his power. Intermittently, Meredith is a great artist ; primarily and consistently, he is a moralist—a teacher. He has pondered on man and his destiny till his insight has perceived whole regions and vistas of human possibility that as yet are untenanted, and he has made it the object of his existence to nerve his fellows to seize and enter on the fulness of their inheritance. It may appear paradoxical that pages which would not have been published by lesser writers, should have found favour with an artist towering head and shoulders above any but the masters, but the explanation is simple enough. It is to be found in Meredith's conviction that he has a

message to deliver and in his willingness to sacrifice all other considerations to its delivery.<sup>1</sup> "*The Empty Purse*," he says in a letter to the author, "is not poetry. But I had to convey certain ideas that could not find place in the novels."

Unwavering sincerity is his passport to attention. And we shall be guilty of a fundamental misconception if we do not recognise from the outset that, even where he seems most obscure, he is always attempting to express a clear idea, never decoying us into a mere morass of words. His writing may at times come close to the ridiculous by overcrowding of its content, but it never comes within sight of bombast or pretension because its author has never experienced the smallest desire to make much out of little. His poems and novels are glossaries on his reading of life, and for Meredith every department of life is teeming with import. His intense and detailed interest in political and international development is elsewhere dealt with; here it is sufficient to note that his dramas move on great backgrounds. Life, and the interplay of art upon life, is his business, the development of the soul his theme.

How from flesh unto spirit man grows,  
Even here on the sod under sun.

"It is," he has said, "the conscience residing in thoughtfulness I would appeal to," and again, "Narrative is nothing. It is the mere vehicle of philosophy. The interest is in the idea which action serves to illustrate."

Man thinks he has seen the spiritual and material forces of the world at war with each other; sentimental romance and so-called realism have been the fruits of this vision. Meredith sees spirit and matter unified, and, in consequence, it is his avowed aim as a novelist

<sup>1</sup> *My Theme*.

to eschew the "rose-pink" of sentiment and the "alternative dirty-drab" of the realist. These two tendencies, running off now at right angles, "fortified by philosophy," he says, will unite in an art that is worthy the name—"honourable fiction, a fount of life, an aid to life, quick with our blood"—a representation of man's nature as it is, "real flesh, a soul born active, wind-beaten, but ascending." This then is Meredith's ideal. But it is an ideal he shares with others. His desire to state facts as they are, and thereby further man's progress, is not unique. Its uniqueness is in the strength that is at work behind it. The distinction between one idealist and another lies in the degree of active and creative force with which each is able to identify his aspirations. Meredith's qualifications for his undertaking—what he has perceived and what he has expressed—we shall hope to analyse as this book proceeds, and there can be no object in forestalling what is to come. It is only necessary here to call attention to his clear and reiterated statements of general purpose, and to recognise a few of the more obvious difficulties his method presents.

The most distinctive peculiarity of his style is his constant, and, as it were, everyday employment of metaphor. Where other writers nail a train of thought or a series of statements in mind with a single comparison, Meredith indicates a dozen images which, taken in flying succession, combine, not merely to express his conclusion, but to reproduce the passage of his thought. Occasionally, image may be piled upon image fantastically, but this is very seldom the case. Usually his manner is recognisably spontaneous and a direct outcome of his matter. His imagination plays over every object he handles, but the point to be specially noted is that it is even more vivid in presenting generalisations



than instances, more scintillating in abstract regions than in concrete. His torches of metaphor are used to light the obscurity of unaccustomed paths. He is a psychologist, though embodying his psychology in poetic and not in scientific form; a poet's mind is penetrating caverns and recesses of thought, and the pathway behind it is aflame. To take an example: in the fourth division of *Modern Love* he turns abruptly from narration to philosophic analysis and disquisition. He enumerates truths that would be valuable and striking even if stated abstractly; but they are not so stated. Imagery is, if anything, more abundant than in the earlier portions of the poem; every line is metaphorical; every generalisation is pictorialised. And the result, for a reader capable of following the story, is a marvellous simplification of subtle and complicated ideas. Not only the experience of the husband in *Modern Love*, but his own, and that of all men whose theories are at war with their passions, appears clarified—converted from something vaguely apprehended to concrete and tangible truth. The philosopher's gold has been put into circulation; Meredith has coined it, and presented it to his fellows; freed it from its overlaying of technicalities and given it a recognisable aspect. More than this is impracticable; it is not coin of the market-place, and only those among his readers are likely to discern its validity whom intellect has enabled or circumstances compelled to dive beneath the surface of things, and to realise departments of existence in which the accepted currency has no purchasing power.

But, apart from the merely unintelligent, two formidable classes of Meredith's critics remain. The first consists of those who in no way underestimate the pressing importance of the problems with which Meredith sets himself to deal, but demand that their

philosophy and fiction shall be served to them in separate dishes. The novel, say they, is nothing if not a form of art; as such it is quite unsuited to be a channel of direct ethical teaching. To say this is, in Meredith's view, to sign the death-warrant of fiction—"to demand of us truth to nature, excluding Philosophy, is really to bid a pumpkin caper." A transcript of modern life, to be in any way credible, must exhibit the inner as well as the outer. It is an epoch when the minds of men are busy; probing, mining, testing themselves and all they meet upon the onward path, groping, individually and collectively, in search of new ideals and inspirations on the nebulous border-lands of knowledge, apprehending laws of existence that have, as yet, no formulæ. The intuitive discoverers—the poets—ahead of all the rest, transcribe now and again some phrase of pure melody to be sung in the ranks of their fellows, but these isolated fragments are apt to be regarded as *objets d'art*, adorable specimens for museums, rather than vital revelations. Meanwhile the rank and file are infected to-day with those blank misgivings, those obstinate questionings, which but yesterday were the exclusive possession of the poet; and in consequence we have "problem" novels from the rear, realistic chroniclings of the mud left by humanity in its train. How bridge the gulf between these ruts of mire and the "shining table-lands" afar, except in the work of a novelist who unites the poet's vision with sturdy sense of social and political growth, who takes humanity with "the stem, the thorns, the roots, and the fat bedding of roses" that in so doing he may envisage and reveal her flower?

The second class consists of readers who, while sympathising with Meredith's themes and his attitude towards them, are alienated by obscurities of style that



seem unworthy and even perverse. Why, they ask, should the writer of *Modern Love* and the *Sonnets* miss out connectives and relative pronouns, invert conditional clauses, use adjectives as substantives, or substantives as adjectives? The answer consists, partly, in the fact that Meredith, failing in the best years of his life to win an adequate public for his work, took to writing for himself—to addressing his own intelligence—and, in doing so, overestimated the alertness of other people's minds. Small opportunity was given him for judging what degree of swiftness average intelligences could bear, and, his own mind being abnormally impatient of the obvious, it was of this opportunity that he stood peculiarly in need. His compression and omission of inessentials is carried too far; and his habit of seizing the essence of one metaphor to give a single aspect of his subject, and neglecting it instantly to snatch a contribution from another, is apt to rank the comparisons rather than the object compared in the forefront of his reader's mind. But in the main, these are the defects of his excellences. Effort may be required for tracking his thoughts, their exactitude is seldom apparent superficially; but, if we are capable of understanding his writings at all, of the best of them at least it may be said that their vigorous atmosphere—their poetic exaltation and vitality—are with us from the beginning. Certain difficulties have to be overcome; but these are by no means so varied as they seem at first sight, they group themselves quickly under recognisable headings. This matter of obscurity has been in fact a good deal overrated. In much of Meredith's work there is no obscurity at all, and the key to the novels and poems which are obscure is supplied by his simpler writings. For the reader who is without that preconceived antagonism to his themes (which he encountered in his

contemporaries) other obstacles will prove unenduring. And, in regard to the few that exist, he is his own best interpreter; "Mrs. Mountstuart," he says, "detested the analysis of her sentence. It had an outline in vagueness and was flung out to be apprehended, not dissected," and of Dudley Sowerby he writes: "The internal state of a gentleman who detested intangible metaphor as heartily as the vulgarest of our gobble-gobbets hate it, metaphor only can describe; and for the reason that he had in him just something more than is within the compass of the language of the meat-markets. He had—and had it not the less because he fain would not have had—sufficient stuff to furnish forth a soul's epic encounter between Nature and Circumstance: and metaphor, simile, analysis, all the fraternity of old lamps for lighting our abysmal darkness, have to be rubbed, that we may get a glimpse of the fray."

## CHAPTER II

### OUTLINE OF MEREDITH'S LIFE AND LITERARY CAREER

GEORGE MEREDITH is of Irish and Welsh descent. He was born in Hampshire on February 12th, 1828, and was sent early to a Moravian school at Neuwied in Germany, where he remained till he was fifteen. On his return to England he began studying law, but very soon abandoned it for literature. For seven or eight years, in the late fifties and beginning of the sixties, he contributed regularly to the *Ipswich Journal* and wrote social and literary articles for the *Morning Post*. He acted as correspondent for the *Morning Post* during the Austro-Italian war of 1866, and stayed for some time in Venice. Towards the end of the year 1867 he undertook the charge of the *Fortnightly Review* while his friend Mr. John Morley was absent in America. He was for many years reader and literary adviser to Messrs. Chapman & Hall and, in this capacity, is said to have discovered *The Story of an African Farm* and its writer. He has been twice married; his second wife died on September 15th, 1885, and is buried close to his present home at Box Hill; his first wife was a daughter of Thomas Love Peacock.

There seems little object, at this distance of time, in dwelling on the curious fact that the papers on which Meredith began his career as a journalist were organs

of the Conservative party, or on his heated defence of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis at the expense of Lincoln and Grant. His opposition to the Manchester School, and Cobden and Bright in particular, will be considered elsewhere. The really noteworthy point is the very unusual degree of attention he devoted to the interests of women in the editorials and notes it was his weekly task to provide.

His first volume, entitled *Poems by George Meredith*,<sup>1</sup> appeared in the year 1851. It is now very rare, but practically the whole of its contents appear in the thirty-first volume of Messrs. Constable's Library Edition of his works under the title of *Poems written in Early Youth*.<sup>2</sup> The verses are boyish and immature, and give small promise of the measure of achievement which is to follow; fine lines occur in *The South-West Wind in the Woodland*, and the first pale sketch for *Love in the Valley* is present, but the general level of workmanship is amazingly inferior to that of the volume containing *Modern Love* and *The Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn*—the *Poems of 1862*. How slight is the hint in these earliest verses of what was to follow may be gleaned from the fact that two of their reviewers, W. M. Rossetti in *The Critic* for November 13th, 1851, and Charles Kingsley in *Fraser's Magazine* for December of that year, refer to their author as peculiarly influenced by Keats. Rossetti's review is distinctly encouraging, but otherwise it contains little or nothing of interest; Charles Kingsley's, on the other hand, is in every way notable and even prophetic. He strikes at once in his opening sentences to the heart of the matter. "Health and sweetness," he says, "are two

<sup>1</sup> Dedicated "To Thomas Love Peacock, Esq., with the profound admiration and affectionate respect of his son-in-law." Weybridge, May, 1851.

<sup>2</sup> One poem only, *Should thy love die*, has here been omitted.

qualities which run through all these poems. They are often overloaded — often somewhat clumsy and ill-expressed — often wanting polish and finish, but they are all genuine, all melodiously conceived, if not always melodiously executed. Mr. Meredith's *Pastorals* too are more like real pastorals than those of any young poet whom we have had for many a year.

. . . ' See on the river the slow-rippled surface  
 Shining ; the slow ripple broadens in circles ; the bright surface  
 smoothen ;  
 Now it is flat as the leaves of the yet unseen water-lily.  
 There dart the lives of a day, ever-varying tactics fantastic.  
 There, by the wet-mirrored osiers, the emerald wing of the king-  
 fisher  
 Flashes, the fish in his beak ! there the dab-chick dived, and the  
 motion  
 Lazily undulates all thro' the tall standing army of rushes.  
 Joy thus to revel all day, till the twilight turns us homeward !  
 Till all the lingering, deep-blooming splendour of sunset is over,  
 And the one star shines mildly in mellowing hues, like a spirit  
 Sent to assure us that light never dieth, tho' day is now buried.'

Careless as hexameters, but honest landscape painting ; and only he who begins honestly ends greatly." We who are accustomed to the astonishing reality and incisiveness which is the leading characteristic of Meredith's poetry, find the promise of it in these earliest verses hard to discover. The greater in consequence should be our tribute to a critic who on so slight a body of writing, could detect this vital sincerity of vision, "the living seed of poetry, certain to grow and develope."

In 1856 came the *Shaving of Shagpat*, followed in 1857 by *Farina*, and in 1859 by the *Ordeal of Richard Feverel*. George Eliot's enthusiastic estimate of *Shagpat* is noted elsewhere, and *The Times*, on the appearance of *Richard Feverel*, published a review<sup>1</sup> with which the most ardent of Meredith's admirers would find it difficult

<sup>1</sup> October 14th, 1859.



to quarrel. Meredith's champions in laying stress on his very real grievance against his reviewers and the public have been apt to leave these notices and Kingsley's appreciation of genius in his earliest efforts a little too much out of count. In reading the general run of contemporary reviews of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* it is impossible not to feel that its writer had the gravest grounds for complaint. The *Athenæum's* summary verdict is that the book is unpleasant, the *Saturday Review*—more long-winded but not more encouraging—laments that Mr. Meredith has "written a didactic novel to teach us so little" and, "by trifling with a moral question, produced entirely a man's book," concluding with the judgment "its author is still in the imitative stage, and sits at the feet of Charles Reade." But against these must be set the extraordinarily lengthy and painstaking review in *The Times*. Nearly fifty years have elapsed since the notice was written, but the general conclusions reached by the reviewer are those of the fair-minded critic of to-day. "Mr. Meredith," he says, "is an original writer, and his book is a powerful book, penetrative in its depth of insight and rich in its variety of experience." Carefully he makes good his contention against the final catastrophe, by which, as he justly remarks, nothing is proved or disproved in regard to the "System." The work, he decides, is strangely imperfect, but "so crystalline and brilliant in its principal passages, there is such purity mingled with its laxness, such sound and firm truth in the midst of its fantastic subtleties" that its greatness is not to be questioned. And with page after page of quotation he makes that greatness apparent, turning at last to the challenge underlying the protests of almost all the objectors. "This book," he concludes, "has been charged with impurity, and tabooed, as we hear, in some

quarters by the over-fastidious. It certainly touches a delicate theme, and includes some equivocal situations, but of impurity, in the sense of any corrupting tendency, we see not a trace." This quality of appreciation was not likely to be common, and another twenty years were to elapse before James Thomson could write in his Diary:<sup>1</sup> "*Athenæum* advertisement of *Egoist*: cordial praise from *Athenæum*, *Pall Mall*, *Spectator*, *Examiner*. At length encouragement! A man of wonderful genius and a splendid writer may hope to obtain something like recognition after working hard for thirty years, dating from his majority!"

Words such as these, from one in the thick of the fight, are reasonable enough, but surely there is cause for complaint in the corresponding attitude of many of Meredith's later admirers, implying, as it does, an insistence on their hero's discomfort at the want of a more universal appreciation of his work. No man is better able to estimate the facts of the case than is Meredith. He wrote from the first, and determined to write, in advance of his age; and to suppose that his maturer years have been spent in cavilling at the price his youthful idealism was willing to pay, is no less than absurd. His modern adherents, in natural resentment at any neglect of his genius, have been inclined to take half-truths for the whole, and certain words of his own have given colour to reports of his misanthropy. "My way," he says, "is like a Rhone island in the summer drought, stony, unattractive and difficult between the two forceful streams of the unreal and the over-real. My people conquer nothing, win none; they are actual yet uncommon. It is the clockwork of the brain that they are directed to set in motion, and—poor troop of actors to vacant benches—the conscience

<sup>1</sup> November 8th, 1879.

residing in thoughtfulness which they would appeal to ; and if you are there impervious to them, we are lost ; back I go to my wilderness, where, as you perceive, I have contracted the habit of listening to my own voice more than is good.”<sup>1</sup> And he is represented as lately as July, 1904, as replying to an interviewer: “The English people know nothing about me. There always has been something antipathetic between them and me. With book after book it was always the same outcry of censure and disapproval. The first time or two I minded it. Since, I have written to please myself.”<sup>2</sup> He has even been represented as like his Diana, “writing his best in perverseness.” Some such spirit is to be detected in the lines that prefaced the first edition of *Modern Love*, in 1862 :—

This is not meat  
For little people or for fools,

and in the *Note*, refuting allegorical intention, prefaced, in 1865, to the second edition of *Shagpat*; but it is far indeed from representing his permanent attitude to his public. His maturer taste is of a quality that would make any brandishing of superiority impossible to him, but the change is even deeper-rooted than that. His faith in democracy has grown firmer and brighter with years,<sup>3</sup> and his latest poems, such as *The Empty Purse* and, most notably, *Foresight and Patience*, are steeped in a passionate feeling for his kind.

The truth seems to be that Meredith’s work was appreciated from the first by the critics capable of appreciating it. The names of George Eliot, Kingsley, and James Thomson have been cited already; and Carlyle’s comment on *Richard Feverel*, “This man’s

<sup>1</sup> *Beauchamp’s Career*.

<sup>2</sup> Henry W. Nevinnson in the *Daily Chronicle*, July 5th, 1905.

<sup>3</sup> See *Letter to Dorking Women’s Liberal Association*, May, 1904.



no fule!" must, even at the time, have outweighed the remarks of a hundred reviewers. For fame, Meredith had, as those of his calibre always have had, to wait. But "If," as Mr. Trevelyan adroitly remarks, "the gods showed their love for Shelley by causing him to die young, they have shown their love for Mr. Meredith in a more satisfactory manner, by leaving him to receive from us in old age the homage that was due to him from our grandfathers,"<sup>1</sup> and for thirty years at least fame has now been his portion. His popularity, a demand for his books at the circulating libraries, did not indeed begin until 1885, with the publication of *Diana*, and it has been the fashion with certain of his aforesaid admirers to comment on this in bewilderment. It was not, say they, to be expected that *The Egoist* would be enthusiastically received, but *Evan Harrington* and *Rhoda Fleming*—surely these were as well fitted as *Diana of the Crossways* to appeal to popular favour? The contention as to the relative merits of the earlier novels is too obvious to need support, yet the circumstance the critics exclaim at is not, in fact, an enigma. *Evan Harrington* and *Rhoda Fleming* had made their appearance some twenty years earlier, when the Time Spirit as yet was not ripe; and *Diana*, moreover, was known to be founded on a substratum of sensational incident which, even if the book had been comparatively worthless, would have ensured its notoriety with the novel-reading public. And such notoriety, though not in itself to be taken very seriously, may well, as in this case it did, serve as an introduction to the many who are able to appreciate elements of more substantial and enduring worth. And Meredith is far too great not to rejoice in the widespread appreciation that is now his fortune. He would, without doubt, have held on his

<sup>1</sup> *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith.*

way, however lonely that way might have proved; though to say this is not to suppose him indifferent to misconception and apathy. His work is the fruit of a rare combination of sensitiveness and strength. In his early days it was inevitable that sensitiveness should be uppermost; it was no less inevitable that it should be quickly subdued to its place; no man, living or dead, has waged such war on Self-Pity as he. To fail to recognise this, and by sentimental enthusiasm to come within sight of attributing to Meredith a belittling of the admiration he receives, is to offer an offence instead of a tribute to his work.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SHAVING OF SHAGPAT, AND FARINA

GEORGE ELIOT, writing in *The Leader* in January, 1856, speaks of *The Shaving of Shagpat* as "a work of genius," precious "as an apple tree among the trees of the wood." The author himself styled it *An Arabian Entertainment*, and prefaced the second edition of 1865 with a note professing to disclaim for it any allegorical intention. When we consider the bias of George Eliot's mind, there is something a little conflicting in the descriptions, but the difficulty may disappear when we are face to face with the author's pronouncement: "It has," he says, "been suggested to me by one who has no fear of Allegories on the banks of the Nile," and, proceeding to recite not very adequate or illuminating suggestions as to his meaning, he ends with the assertion: "Allegories to be of any value must be perfectly clear, and when perfectly clear, are as little attractive as Mrs. Malaprop's reptile." With a writer much less subtle than Meredith, the key in which the opening sentence of the disclaimer is pitched might have sounded a warning to arrest the reader's attention, and set him on his guard against being beguiled.

The root idea of the allegory is plain enough. It

is suggested in a rhyme on the third page of the tale :—

Thou that dreamest an Event,  
While circumstance is but a waste of sand,  
Arise, take up thy fortunes in thy hand  
And daily forward pitch thy tent.

The young barber, Shibli Bagarag, goes through many toils and vicissitudes but he achieves his purpose of shaving Shagpat, and is crowned with the proudest of titles, "Master of an event." His experience, and its fruitfulness for others, are summed up at the close of the book, again in rhyme :—

Ye that nourish hopes of fame !  
Ye who would be known in song !  
Ponder old history, and duly frame  
Your souls to meek acceptance of the thong.

Lo ! of hundreds who aspire  
Eighties perish—nineties tire !  
They who bear up, in spite of wrecks and wracks,  
Were season'd by celestial hail of thwacks.

Fortune in this mortal race  
Builds on thwackings for its base ;  
Thus the All-Wise doth make a flail a staff,  
And separates his heavenly corn from chaff.

Shibli Bagarag, we perceive, stands for a reformer ; Shagpat is the abuse with which he is to contend. So much is plain to us all. But beyond this point most of the meaning of the allegory is so enwrapped in the incidents that it has waited half a century for an interpreter. Within the past year the task has been essayed by the Reverend James McKechnie,<sup>1</sup> and performed with striking success. He has included all that was, within the limits of one short lecture, possible to include, and the special merit of his treatment is the way in which he has confined himself to an elucidation of the main issues of the story. Shagpat, he tells us, is to be

<sup>1</sup> *George Meredith's Allegory, The Shaving of Shagpat*, interpreted by James McKechnie. James M'Kelvie and Sons : Greenock.

interpreted freely, as any established evil, any baneful superstition, any tyranny of lies. He calls our attention to Meredith's understanding of the nature of a genuine reformer. Shibli Bagarag is no iconoclast; the shave he proposed at first was no root-and-crop destruction, but the removal merely of certain gross and obvious abuses; a cleansing in the interests of health and decency. But the world's Shagpats never consent to a friendly shave, they are blind to the friendliness of it, and "thwack" the would-be operator. This thwacking process proves too much for the great majority of budding reformers, who relapse to their native obscurity forthwith. Only the chosen few, the men of true greatness, remain. Shibli Bagarag sustains the ordeal, and proves his mettle by betrothing himself to Noorna-bin-Noorka, the ugliest member of the family of the Duties, spite of the fact that it is through following Noorna's suggestions that some at least of his thwackings have come. "Duty when betrothed becomes Ambition," and that is the name by which to Shibli Bagarag Noorna is henceforth to be known; it is her true title. The youth does not yet love her, but he is loyal to her, and his loyalty is rewarded by radiant flashings through the veil of her ugliness, tokens and promises of a beauty that is to be. "Ugly Noornas are the blood-royal of Heaven. Heaven awaits those who betroth them." Fired and elevated with ambition, Shibli Bagarag develops within himself amazing resources. By concentration of aim he becomes larger and wiser, and gets the grip of his own greatness. We hear much of magical aid in his enterprise, but it should be noted that his spirit-bride, Noorna-bin-Noorka, the "sorceress ensorcelled," does not bestow the three spells on him; she merely puts him in the way of securing them for himself. The first, Water from the Well of Paravid, was

only to be obtained by a fearless plunge into an apparently bottomless well from which the diver emerged with blood on the hand that was holding his treasure. The well is the Well of Truth, and its waters have power to make things animate and inanimate reveal their true natures. Possession of the Phial signifies the gift of Insight, the seeing eye and the understanding heart. The second is Three Hairs from the Tail of the horse Garaveen, who is to be brought to Shibli Bagarag's side by the Call of Battle, to be caught by being struck on the fetlock with a Musk Ball, and to be tamed by having the figure of the Crescent traced upon his forehead. Garaveen symbolises Enthusiasm; and the three actions are the three hairs or strands that go to make up the spell. The Call to Battle is the merely instinctive enthusiasm, the warrior's delight, the pugilist's fervour; the Musk Ball is sensuous glamour, passionate activity, conscious joy in creation; the Crescent—the power to tame Garaveen, to yoke him to the plough, to give him capacity for drudgery—is religion. Third and last of the charms is the Lily of the Lovely Light, the Lily of the Enchanted Sea. This is the Soul's Ideal, its vision of the kingdom that should be on the earth. There are ideals rooted only in the intellect and serviceable merely for purposes of criticism; Shibli Bagarag's was not of this kind, it had for root a living, palpitating heart and compelled him to action. Shibli Bagarag and his bride were carried to the Well of Paravid by the evil genie Karaz in the form of an enchanted ass, "Men see the right by the assistance of the wrong. They are carried to truth on the back of falsehood. Error plays the ass and helps the reformer." Shibli is now equipped with the three essentials for his enterprise, "Insight—accurate knowledge of things as they are; Idealism—clear



vision of things as they ought to be; Enthusiasm—strength to change things as they are into things as they ought to be,” but nothing is yet achieved. He has the spells but he has not used them: he is not master of an event. It is time for him to press forward. Noorna points him to the signal of his approach flaming on the mountains of Aklis and tells him that the sword which is being sharpened there, the sword for the shaving of Shagpat, awaits his arrival. But Shibli Bagarag is weary; that passion for reality which has singled him out from his fellows, for the time being is spent. He loses grip of his will, allows his mind to be unemployed, and passes into the realm of Rabesqurat, Queen of Illusions, the realm of drifting. This place had proved fatal to many, if not to most, of the searchers for the sword, and Shibli Bagarag might, “for any self-control he was exercising, have plunged into some tank of temptation, and wallowed there until return to cleanness and strength was impossible. But his fair heredity, his wholesome instincts—the self within the self saved him.” And now we come to Aklis. “Shagpatism represents life in its institutional aspect, full of errors, superstitions and wrongs. The Quest of the Spells represents life in its aspiring and disciplinary aspect, a school wherein, by much effort and hardship, man may learn wisdom. The Realm of Rabesqurat represents life in its frivolous, pleasure-loving, superficial aspect. Aklis represents life in what may be called its legal aspect, using that word not in its institutional but its cosmic sense. This devil’s lottery of existence, this chaotic tossing and tumbling of things—see it through the eye of Aklis and all is order, law, government. ‘No aid or friendliness in Aklis.’ No chance or injustice in Aklis. Here the unseen powers keep shop. All manner of merchandise,

suiting every taste, is to be got in exchange for spells. But without spells, appointed and of proportionate value, nothing is to be got, for the unseen powers are strict merchant-men and no dispensers of charity." Aklis is the realm, not of efforts, but of results, and to linger there is disastrous. Men destined for greatness must pass through it quickly, claiming whatever weapons their spells can procure. But Shibli Bagarag finds himself greeted there as famous, the foremost man of his age, possessed of the three mighty Spells; he is tempted to rest awhile on his laurels. He is snared by the Duping Brides. "He is represented in the Allegory as a benumbed and pathetic piece of statuary, sitting on a throne from which he could not move, crowned with a crown of bejewelled asses' ears. Wanted immediately a shower of lusty thwacks—thwacks with a sting in them to be applied for the awakening of Shibli Bagarag. Alas! the world has no thwacks for Shibli Bagarag. Ear-tickling, soothing flatteries are its gift to him now. Praise God, man can come to his own rescue. Man can thwack himself. As he sat on that benumbing throne the memory of his Noorna, his duty and his ambition, came mightily and reproachfully on the youth. He laughed the *thinker's* laugh—the bitter laugh of self-criticism—potent to break all bonds of evil magic, to set all captives free. What was that laugh but Shibli Bagarag thwacking himself? Self-inflicted thwacks hurt most and heal most when there is humour in the administering of them. The man who cannot laugh at himself is in bondage to himself. The man who cannot see over his own shoulders will never grow taller. Self-criticism is the chief saving-grace of life; had Shibli Bagarag not possessed it his career would certainly have closed in that Hall of the Duping Brides. As it was he arose in chastened mood to



seek the sword." The Sons of Aklis, sharpeners of the sword, represent the Time-Spirit, and they have the weapon in waiting for Shibli. The Sword is the emblem of destruction; Shagpat's opportunity for survival by submission to a friendly, conservative cleansing is past. But before it is placed in Shibli's hands he is required to surrender his spells to Gulrevéz, the milk-white antelope. "Masters of events, saviours of the world, have necessarily escaped from cramping and betraying personal motives. They are men who resolutely sacrifice themselves, and who hold the sword at the price of sacrifice. By finally abandoning self-seeking, by sinking himself and all that he had in his cause, Shibli Bagarag became a mighty and a consecrated power. The sword of the Lord was in his hands." But so great a power is dangerous to wield. Shibli had learned the lightning-like qualities of the sword, and as he recrossed the stream that divides Aklis from the world, he was evilly tempted to flash it in order to discover the features of the Veiled Figure ferrying the boat. The sight froze and paralysed his limbs. Hideously he laughed like one insane. "In her nameless nature he saw Rabesqurat Queen of Illusions. Shibli Bagarag had seen Rabesqurat before. He had examined her by the light of the lily, and seen a 'sight to blacken the earth and all bright things with its hideousness,' but strange to say, so little did the sight affect him that almost immediately he was on good terms with the Queen again. What the flashing of the sword showed him, though scarcely worse in itself, had an immeasurably worse effect on him. It blighted him, drove strength and sunshine from him, well-nigh paralysed him for life. There behold the terrible privilege of earnestness. Dilettantish pessimists have been known to number themselves among those sad

initiates, those wisdom-blighted ones who have looked behind the Veil and seen the nameless sight. They have, at most, seen Rabesqurat by the light of the lily—something vastly different from seeing her by the flashing of the sword." At last Shibli Bagarag's training was complete, and he was equal to his task. He is cautious now in his daring, calm in his impulse. His enemy is taken unawares; in the hour of his triumph the sword of Aklis descends. Fearful was the struggle that ensued, genii and men taking part in it, but at its end "day was on the baldness of Shagpat."

It has seemed the best, and in fact the only adequate, method of paying just tribute to Mr. McKechnie's achievement to give this short abstract of his lecture uninterrupted by interpolation or comment. His limit of time was severe, and the success of his undertaking is largely due to rigid exclusion of side issues and complexities; moreover, the *Afterword* he has added to his interpretation makes it quite clear that the delicate and elusive qualities of the work have in no way escaped his attention. The Genie Karaz is, perhaps, a little too summarily dismissed. His power is immense, and Noorna in telling Shibli Bagarag of her past recalls his terrific schemes for the perversion and destruction of mankind and his influence in her life. He would seem to stand for the perverted and misdirected forces of the world which the wise man must encounter and subdue in order to mould them to his ends. When Noorna first summons the genie, she replies to her father's objections to making use of him—

It is the sapiency of fools  
To shrink from handling evil tools,

and, through much danger and difficulty, she subdues him to the shape of an ass and renders him otherwise

serviceable to her bidding. There is kinship between this idea and the fact that the Waters of Paravid include in their virtue the kind of insight required for the comprehension and management of men. On his return from the Well, Noorna welcomes her lover with the words, "'Tis achieved, the first of thy tasks; for mutely on the fresh red of thy mouth, my betrothed, speaketh the honey of persuasiveness." She replies to Shibli's question as to how he is to find his way unaided to the City of Oolb, with the reminder that a drop from his phial will endow the very herbage, stones, and sand of the desert, with powers of speech; yet two pages later we come on the injunction, "Where men are, question not dumb things," as the only response to be elicited from a city fountain questioned by Shibli. This is a characteristically Meredithian touch. No man ranks the magic of natural things higher than he, but it is to be studied chiefly as a means to an end, and that end the comprehension of ourselves and our fellows. His seer is one who "hither, thither fares, close interthreading nature with our kind,"<sup>1</sup> and he condemns the out-of-door enthusiast in the last of his novels for "studying abstract and adoring surface nature too exclusively to be aware of the manifestation of her spirit in the flesh."<sup>2</sup>

We have quoted Mr. McKechnie's excellent comments on the laugh of self-criticism that released Shibli from the Hall of the Duping Brides. But it is not at this point only that the Allegory insists on the uses of laughter; the idea is elsewhere recurrent. The men enslaved by the evil magician Goorelka, and changed into birds piping at her pleasure, are freed and restored as soon as Noorna has succeeded in keeping them laughing uninterruptedly for the space of an

<sup>1</sup> *Earth's Secret*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Amazing Marriage*, chapter xxv.

hour ; and the full virtue and valour of that cleansing laugh in the Hall is only revealed to us as we consider the nature of the experiences that preceded it. From the Realm of Rabesqurat, with all its appeal to the senses, Shibli Bagarag had made his escape. Consequently, here in Aklis, he has been immune from temptations offered by the fountains of jewels, the scented halls, and the marvels of the feast. It was only to the blandishments of the seven-and-twenty damsels, robed in the colours of the rising and setting sun, and waiting to hail and crown him as their king, that he ultimately succumbed. He had taken the precaution, moreover, to hold the Lily to the faces of the maidens and to wet their lips with water from the Phial, and no change had taken place in their beauty or their bearing, except that they each broke into luting and singing of verses descriptive of their various temperaments. One, light as an antelope on the hills, with timid, graceful movements, sang :—

Swiftness is mine, and I fly from the sordid ;

another, with arrows of fire in her eyes, and voiced like the passionate bulbul in the shadows of the moon, sang, clasping her hands :—

Love is my life, and with love I live only,  
Give me life, lover, and leave me not lonely ;

whilst one came straight up to Shibli, took him by the hand and pierced him with her glance, singing :—

Were we not destined to meet by one planet ?  
Can a fate sever us ? can it, ah ! can it ?

Shibli succumbs, and he is crowned and enthroned in a small inner chamber ; crowned, as he is presently to discover, with asses' ears and glued to his throne. His charmers depart ; the door of his chamber is shut ; and he is left in thick darkness, alone. He cannot get free

of his throne, but his agonised efforts avail to move it, as he sits, out into the Hall of the Brides. There the doors of ninety-eight recesses stand open, and ninety-eight other dupes, solemn and motionless on their thrones, are displayed to his sight. There seems small hope of freedom for Shibli; many of these monarchs are old, and all appear to have been long in their places. Yet the sight of fellow dupes may give him an opening for mirth. But Shibli does not laugh, he does not even smile, till his eyes light on a mirror that reflects the crown on his forehead. Then, not at the sight of the ludicrous appearance of others, but at his own idiotic predicament, he shakes the Hall with his laughter.

Great stress is laid by Mr. McKechnie on the fact that when Shibli has peered through the veil of the Ferrying Figure, he does not say what he has seen. "Rabesqurat," says Mr. McKechnie, "in her nameless nature, it is forbidden to speak of her. God seals the lips of those whom he lets peer behind the Veil." Is not this interpretation at once too definite and too vague? Shibli himself gasps the name "Rabesqurat," but it is clear that what he sees cannot be the Queen of Illusions as she was shown to us earlier. Sensuous enticements cannot befooled him now, it must be impossible therefore to terrify him with revelations of their illusion. The change in standpoint is subtle, but it is essential. Of old, the Queen pitted her immediate satisfactions of sense against the life of the spirit, and for a while she prevailed. "The soul of Shibli Bagarag was blinded by Rabesqurat in the depths of the Enchanted Sea. She sang to him, luting deliriously; and he was intoxicated with the blissfulness of his fortune, and took a lute and sang to her love-verses in praise of her, rhyming his rapture. Then they handed



the goblet to each other, and drank till they were on fire with the joy of things." Temptation, then, took a comparatively elementary form; illusions were mistaken for realities. The matter is vastly different now; and the key to the difference is to be found in the title of the *Ferrying Figure*. This last and latest temptation is the very converse of the earlier wiles of Rabesquat. The reformer aflame with his mission is suddenly confronted with the visage of Death, and every healthful and natural instinct of his nature, for the time being, is paralysed. He loses hold on reality, he sees Life itself as an Illusion. His sense of values is lost, he ceases to be interested in his existence, and it is due to the friendship of Abarak and the bracing affection of Noorna that the ashes of his spirit are ever rekindled. If there are any who require to be convinced either of the greatness of the Allegory, or of Meredith's understanding of human life, they cannot do better than turn to these three chapters, "The Veiled Figure," "The Bosom of Noorna," and "The Revival," some eleven pages in all. The Reformer has been trained, tested, and fully equipped for his task; his spells are surrendered, his life is dedicate, when this final disaster overtakes him. Connecting the experience with Rabesquat, we see it as merely the swing of the pendulum, the old incapacity for separating illusion from reality, seen on its reverse side. The truth seems simple enough now it is revealed, but the discovery is Meredith's and not ours. For in life, as in *Shagpat*, the two forms of seduction lie far apart. The first is obvious and depends upon man's ignorance; the second is subtle and avails itself of his knowledge;—it is the temptation of the spiritually minded, of those who are learning to "sit lightly to the world," and loose the tenacity of their grasp on tangible and material concerns. An



ascetic has claimed that no genuine Contemplative forgets or neglects the details of his or her organisation or Order, and he instances the extraordinary capacity for detail of such minds as St. Catherine's. On this point at least Meredith and he would find themselves in agreement. But there is in existence a pseudo-mysticism far from uncommon, which allows its semi-philosophic emphasis on transiency and mortality to paralyse the only means of expression of which man's spirit is assured. The familiar "We will eat and drink, for to-morrow we die" of the courtiers of Rabesquat is complicated now. "To-morrow we die" stands at the beginning of the aphorism, and in the shadow of it all human organisation and effort sink to the level of eating and drinking.

It is curious that, amid the chorus of more or less intelligent appreciation by which George Meredith in his old age is surrounded, no voice should have been raised to comment on the fact that last year—1906—marked the jubilee of his advent as a novelist. The explanation probably is that even among the small number of readers acquainted with *The Shaving of Shagpat* and *Farina* very few are aware how long ago it is that they were written. No mark of age is borne by their contents, and it is almost impossible to regard them as two generations old, at least till they are seen in their original dress. Some strangeness there certainly is about the rough pea-green cover and coarse gilt lettering of the *Farina* of 1857—a strangeness shared by the tone of the criticism which greeted it. The *Saturday Review* cavilled at the redundancy of its language, attributing the fault to the influence of "Mr. Ruskin, who has taught young writers to lay on their colours too bright and too thick." The *Athenæum* is more appreciative of Meredith's powers in general, but,

in regard to this book in particular, the reviewer inclines to take with one hand what he has given with the other. "*Farina*," he says, "is a full-blooded specimen of the nonsense of genius."

The main motive is a well-sustained rendering of romantic adventure in a medieval setting. The story tells how Farina, a youth of Cologne, who has all the courage of his companions without their barbarous methods of showing it, wins the city's cynosure, daughter of the wealthiest burgess, for his wife. The purity of his love and the perfection of his courage are shown to be interdependent, and the method by which his bride is won introduces the "second subject." Farina accompanies Monk Gregory, who has an appointment with the Devil, to the summit of the Drachenfels. With the youth as his witness, Gregory encounters the Evil One. The Devil, feigning the monk his conqueror, disappears to the nether regions by way of Cologne. But the smell of his exit makes the city uninhabitable; and the Kaiser, who is encamped outside, cannot come into it. Farina is a Chemist, and he escorts the Kaiser, conquers the stench with the "Eau de Cologne" he has invented, and receives his bride in reward.

As to Margarita's willingness there has for long been no question. For she is of the order of beings that Meredith loves; a girl with many boy-like characteristics, who uses her eyes and her brain for the purpose of finding realities and living in the light of them. The key to her character is given in her reply to Lisbeth's warnings against her natural depravity, "Where I see no harm, Aunty, I shall think the good God is, and where I see there's harm, I shall think Satan lurks." Siegfried is her hero; courage and tenderness are the qualities she asks in a lover, and as soon as she finds

them in Farina, she loves him directly, openly, and with her whole heart. We see her first in the vineyards, dressed in a short, blue gown with a scarlet bodice; her hair like ripe corn, and in it a saffron crocus stuck bell downwards. Her blue eyes smile frankly, but something as yet unstirred is in their depths—a sleeping dragon—which because Margarita “has not dallied with heroes in dreams” will spring up at need, will handle a sword in the den of the robbers, and face death unafraid. Wedded to her, Farina, when warehouses of false Farinas displaying flasks like his own rise round him on all hands, is able to laugh at “the back-blows of Sathanas.” “Fame and fortune,” he mused, “come from man and the world. Love is from heaven. We may be worthy and lose the first. We lose not love unless unworthy. Would ye know the true Farina? Look for him who walks under the seal of bliss; whose darling is for ever his young, sweet bride, leading him from snares, priming his soul with celestial freshness. There is no hypocrisy can ape that aspect.”

Though the tale—included now in *Chloe and other Stories*—is short, it contains many of the elements of Meredith’s later work and amply enough portrays his special faculty for uniting pageant and problem in the reading of life. Its chief interest for us lies in the extent to which it takes on the clothing we recognise to-day as characteristic of Meredith’s thought, though to say this is not to neglect the fact that it possesses a rarity and value of its own. The frank contrast between the monk, who by renouncing the joy of life fell a prey to spiritual pride and its destruction, and Farina, who by his fearless welcome of all life gave, achieved the very conquest claimed by the ascetic, is the keynote of the whole.

So far Meredith’s essays in fiction consist of two ex-

periments, two imitations of definite styles of romance. Neither may appeal to our taste; we may object to both of his models; but we can hardly question his skill as a copyist, or refuse to admit that his dramas have a vitality unobscured by the mannerisms in which they are clothed. It is evident, too, that he has views of his own to express; views serious, though not always stated with the obvious seriousness the Englishman is apt to demand. Social reformation, for instance, is typified by a shave; "thwacking" epitomises the long spiritual discipline the reformer has to undergo; and the natural fragrance of a life that overcomes the ascetic's slur upon humanity is symbolised by the invention of Eau de Cologne. He has shown unusual agility in catching the idioms of alien languages; he is, we suspect, training himself to speak in his own. Yet at the outset, the Wagging Tongue<sup>1</sup> and "the spell that tieth every faculty except the tongue, the spell of vain longing," have been held up to our scorn. He has not yet found his voice; but when he speaks, he will, we feel, speak to the purpose.

<sup>1</sup> "The Story of Khilpil the Builder." *Shaving of Shagpat*.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ORDEAL OF RICHARD FEVEREL

THIS, the first of George Meredith's novels, appeared in 1859, two years after *Farina*, and three from the *Shaving of Shagpat*. There is no affectation of frivolity, no cloaking of earnestness here; *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* is red-hot from the first page to the last. It does not contain the noblest of Meredith's creations, and the emotional pitch is not so evenly sustained as in *Sandra Belloni*, but in its fusion of intellect and feeling it is perhaps the greatest of his works. The thought is vitally related to the subject, and in comparison with most of Meredith's novels, the book is free from side issues and intellectual excursions. The Feverels are brilliant, and in their mouths aphorisms are not out of place. Sir Austin Feverel, moreover, is just the kind of person who would commit his reflections to paper and publisher; and, in availing himself of this likelihood, Meredith has obtained his background of disquisition and comment with unusual adroitness. "Who rises from Prayer a better man, his prayer is answered." "When we know ourselves fools, we are already something better." "For this reason so many fall from God who have attained to Him; that they cling to Him with their Weakness, not with their Strength." "Nature is not all dust, but a living portion of the spheres. In aspiration it is our error to despise her,



forgetting that through Nature only can we ascend." Those who are familiar with Meredith's thought through his subsequent works recognise these sayings as expressions of his most individual conviction, but in *Richard Feverel* they appeared woven into the fabric of the plot and related to the character of Sir Austin.

I find it impossible to agree with Mr. Le Gallienne in his preference for *Richard Feverel* in its earliest form. Little of value has disappeared from the later editions, and the dramatic intensity of the work is greatly enhanced by the pruning of exuberant details. Far from being regrettable, those alterations appear to me the best of witnesses to Meredith's power of self-criticism.<sup>1</sup> Detailed accounts of the many lady admirers of "The Pilgrim's Scrip," Sir Austin's progenitors, Sir Miles Papworth's convictions and appearance, even Richard's babyhood and earliest birthdays and Ripton Thompson's invitation to Raynham and arrival there, were surely beneath the dignity of the book. But to say this is not of course to deny value to the existence of the original edition; the only question is as to the nature of that value. Many of us feel that we could spare little that Meredith has given; but, over and above this consideration, the original edition of the story is valuable in familiarising us with the earlier stages of the author's thought in reference to some of his characters. They have gained, become more vital and unified in later presentment; but, granting that fact, we may yet, in the case of Sir Austin at least, glean a good deal from the earlier and less vigorous portrait. We hear more of his popularity before the date of his lady's

<sup>1</sup> The history of the poem *In the Woods* affords another striking example of this power. It appeared in *The Fortnightly* for August, 1870, and consisted of nine stanzas. Of these nine, three only, now known as *Whimper of Sympathy*, *Woodland Peace*, and *Dirge in Woods*, have been reprinted, and these are amended remarkably.

defection ; we see him from that time, when Richard is four years of age, fussy and over-anxious, even superstitious in his guardianship ; and we realise a fact which, though really completely stated in subsequent editions, may be missed by readers unfamiliar with the general trend of Meredith's thought—that the baronet's calamity, instead of making a philosopher of him as he supposed, had led him to dwell on "The Ordeal" of the Feverels and regard his experience as unique. Here too we have the explanation of what to many of us was puzzling—how Sir Austin, with his instinct for nobleness, could have elected Adrian, rather than Austin, as Richard's preceptor. "Austin had offended against the Baronet's main crotchet, that to ally oneself randomly was to be guilty of a crime before Heaven greater than the offence it sought to extinguish."<sup>1</sup> Later editions merely inform us that Austin Wentworth does not live with his wife, and that he is reproached for being "barren to posterity while knaves are propagating"; but in this, the earliest, his uncle's attitude is presented with considerably greater explicitness. "Think, Madam," the baronet says to Lady Blandish, "think that he, a young man of excellent qualities, has madly disinherited his future. I do not forgive him. The nobler he, the worse his folly. I do not forgive him." Benson's curious and somewhat offensive position in the household is explained also, and on similar grounds ; the butler had been the victim of a connubial misfortune, and was known to share Sir Austin's opinion of women. In short, the degree of emphasis laid on this particular subject in the first edition of the book is tasteless, and in later life Meredith has been quick to realise the fact. To us it is valuable only as bringing out the truth that Sir Austin, while he supposes himself detached and judicial,

<sup>1</sup> 1859 Edition. Vol. i, page 54.



in reality is singularly warped by his suffering. His "Pilgrim's Scrip" is a mine of much wisdom, and written, we are told, "from the Triad which gives a healthy utterance to wisdom—reflection, feeling, and experience," but pride and self-pity prevent him from turning his knowledge to account. "The direct application of an aphorism," we are told, "was unpopular at Raynham." Yet, in spite of his System, Sir Austin is by no means a fool; Meredith describes him, at the crucial moment of his relationship to Richard, as "a fine mind, and a fine heart, at the bounds of a nature not great." That he is cognizant of his own total lack of humour is stated explicitly, and for such cognizance real intellect is necessary; a belief in their perception of the comic being one of the most deeply rooted prejudices of unimagined minds. It is admirable also to keep a brave face to the world—when one is injured to refuse to whimper—and in this task Sir Austin is only too successful. Above the common run of men in character, he emerges triumphant from the common testings of conduct; he is cruelly deceived, but deception does not make him wrathful or vindictive. In the normal relations of life his bearing is blameless, but he aspires to something greater than these, and, in aspiring, encounters his Ordeal. He attempts to play Providence to Richard, and to stand to Lady Blandish for wisdom incarnate. His early misfortune has taught him something of mankind, but little or nothing of himself. When Richard breaks from his control, he questions, not the nature of that control, but the soundness of humanity; when Lady Blandish pleads for Richard's forgiveness he imagines himself great-minded in the maintenance of a rigid superiority. "By the springs of Richard's future, his father sat: and the devil said to him: 'Only be quiet: do nothing: reso-

lutely do nothing : your object now is to keep a brave face to the world, so that all may know you superior to this human nature that has deceived you.' Further he whispered, 'And your System—if you would be brave to the world, have courage to cast the dream of it out of you : relinquish an impossible project ; see it as it is—dead : too good for men!' 'Ay!' muttered the baronet, 'all who would save them perish on the Cross!'" "How," comments Sir Austin's creator, "are we to distinguish the dark chief of the Manichæans when he talks our own thoughts to us?" Chiefly, perhaps, by this tendency to lay the blame for our peculiar griefs on humanity's shortcomings ; above all, by any inclination to seek great parallels for our private experiences, and in debasing words of high and holy association, betray our ignorance of spiritual values.

"Expediency is man's wisdom, doing right is God's." On this truth, apprehended intellectually by Sir Austin, his nephew Austin Wentworth intuitively acts. We hear of him as socially condemned, not for the sin of his youth but for its atonement—" 'Married his mother's housemaid,' whispered Mrs. Doria,"—and as a friend of the poor. But we first see him in his interview with Tom Bakewell and his subsequent conversations with Richard. Unlike the rest of the Feverels, he is not brilliant or even quick-witted. He avoids preaching at Richard ; but the avoidance is instinctive rather than reasoned ; for he falls into the intellectually equivalent error of attempting to bring realities home to the boy by picturing to him Tom Bakewell's discomfort in prison. Richard's sense of the ludicrous is infinitely keener than Austin's, and reminders of poor Tom's loutishness do not help on the argument. Nevertheless, Austin's purpose is achieved. Richard sets forth in his company to make confession to the farmer, and the scene is typical

of the way in which Austin Wentworth's single-mindedness serves to brush brain-spun obstacles like cobwebs from his path. Lucy's admirers, half-hearted and whole-hearted alike, hesitate and manœuvre for months as to how she is to be brought into her father-in-law's presence ; Austin returns from five years' absence in the tropics to learn Lucy's address and the outline of her story from a chance meeting with Adrian in Piccadilly, and by nightfall she and her child are with him at Raynham. "I have brought Richard's wife, sir," with a joking question as to his own exact relationship to the baby, serve as their introduction ; and when the newcomers are accepted and borne off to sleeping-apartments, "A person you take to at once" is his only rejoinder to the Baronet's favourable comment on Lucy's appearance. It is he who brings Bessie Berry's long-truant husband to her feet. It is his presence Lady Blandish entreats when Lucy lies dead in the French cabaret ; the tragedy has darkened beyond human aid, but she feels that Austin's presence may rekindle charity and faith in its spectators. He moves in and out of the foreground as an influence none the less potent for his complete lack of assumption ; where Austin is, we feel all will go well, just as where Adrian is all will go wrong. The fact that his actual appearances are short and infrequent would be more regrettable were it not for our consciousness that he survives as a permanent ideal in the mind of his author. We find ourselves moved to particular sympathy with Bessie Berry's parting reminder to Lucy on that strange night of their arrival at Raynham : "And now let us pray blessings on that simple-speaking gentleman who does se much 'cause he says se little," but we feel that the actual terms of the description cover not Austin Wentworth alone, but a whole family of Meredith's masculine characters.

It is, as Mr. Le Gallienne has pointed out, by the very strangest of mistakes that Adrian Harley has been confused with Meredith's ideal and even with himself. It is indeed a cardinal point of his teaching that intellect is the true guide of the spiritual man, and that feeling, however sweet and pure it may be, is an insufficient director of conduct. But in all such teaching it is needful to make certain assumptions, and that the capacity for emotion is an essential of human equipment is a fact on which he has supposed it needless to insist. Adrian is an excellent piece of characterisation; he is the wittiest person in the book, and all the Feverels are witty. To Austin's plea of urgency when Richard is implicated in the rick-burning, "The boy's fate is being decided now," he yawns out the retort, "So is everybody's, my dear Austin," and to Richard's repeated assertions that Lucy had done all in her power to put off their marriage, he rejoins, "Not all! not all. She could have shaved her head for instance." But in spite of Adrian's cleverness, Meredith allows us no manner of doubt as to his baseness of nature. "Adrian Harley," he tells us, "had mastered his philosophy at the early age of one-and-twenty. Many would be glad to say the same at that age twice-told; they carry in their breasts a burden with which Adrian's was not loaded. Mrs. Doria was nearly right about his heart. A singular mishap (at his birth, possibly, or before it) had unseated that organ and shaken it down to his stomach." Lucy, when his name is mentioned, inquires whether he is good. "Good?" says Richard. "He's very fond of eating, that's all I know about Adrian." He is in the habit of making jokes "delicately not decent, though so delicately so that it was not decent to perceive it." He is a person to be reckoned with on account of his quick-wittedness; but he is detestable, and it would hardly be

possible for him to be more heartily detested than he is by his author.

Richard's cousin Clare is one of the least satisfactory features of the book ; her death is intended to heighten the tragedy, but in effect it is not convincing. We are told in connection with Richard's home-coming after his long separation from his friends that the duel to take place on the morrow made the worth of each human relationship clear to him, "the thought of the leaden bullet dispersed all unrealities." This, we feel, is as it should be, and as it actually is. But it cuts at the root of the story of Clare. She has decided to die ; she has even taken the potion ; yet she writes on, in her diary, of love and longing for Richard, writes till bodily torment is revealed in the penmanship, and till the friends into whose hands the pocket-book falls must be convinced of her suicide. Even allowing for a strong vein of morbidity, this is not life as we know it. Clare with her unassuming generous nature would probably not have written so at all ; but, if she had, it is certain that, in the presence of death, she would have destroyed, she would not have prolonged her record. The diarist's is the action not of the person who commits suicide but of the person who talks of committing it.

The first edition of *The Ordeal* contained, as has been said, a good deal that was tasteless ; but what is remarkable to note is that the portions, now so wisely discarded, concerned only subsidiary matters. The infantine Richard, Mrs. Doria, Sir Austin's admirers, Benson, Ripton Thompson, the old doctor, and Mrs. Grandison, were the characters affected. The heart of the tale, its heights and depths, were all as we now know them. Nothing has been taken from the scene of Richard's meeting with Lucy, and nothing has been added to it. The river that opened out to the founts of the world



was the same as it is now, magical with the genuine magic of dawn. Gleam of water and earth, glint of heron and kingfisher, song of sky-lark and blackbird, with scent of the meadows—these things were caught, exquisite and unmarred, from the first. The Idyll of young Love, with its background of midsummer flowers, came from the hand of the author perfect as now. "Golden lie the meadows : golden run the streams ; red gold is on the pine-stems. The sun is coming down to earth, and walks the fields and the waters. The sun is coming down to earth, and the fields and the waters shout to him golden shouts. He comes, and his heralds run before him, and touch the leaves of oaks, and planes and beeches lucid green, and the pine-stems redder gold ; leaving brightest foot-prints upon thickly-weeded banks, where the foxglove's last upper-bells incline, and bramble-shoots wander amid moist rich herbage. The plumes of the woodland are alight ; and beyond them over the open, 'tis a race with the long-thrown shadows ; a race across the heath and up the hills, till, at the farthest bourne of mounted eastern cloud, the heralds of the sun lay rosy fingers, and rest. Sweet are the shy recesses of the woodland. The ray treads softly there. A film athwart the pathway quivers, many-hued, against purple shade fragrant with warm pines, deep moss-beds, feathery ferns. The little brown squirrel drops tail and leaps ; the inmost bird is startled to a chance tuneless note. From silence unto silence things move."

"With its background," did I say? The phrase is strangely superficial. Speech or action of the lovers occupies the least part of the pages in which the marvel of their love is revealed. The greater part is devoted to the pageant of earth, the glorious procession of the hours. It is customary to believe that whatever else Meredith may have done or left undone,

he has accomplished in *The Egoist* that which he came to do. But that book, brilliant as it is, appears hardly more than a sketch—a study in temperaments—when compared with the full-blooded, passionate wealth of some of his other works. The intellectual subtleties, of which he is so renowned a master, are his snare; they lead him constantly into error in estimation and treatment of detail. For the genius of his work lies not in its artistic perfection, nor even in its intellectual subtlety, but rather in its greatness of original outline and conception. *Richard Feverel*, *Sandra Belloni*, and *Harry Richmond* are not artistically perfected, they contain subsidiary characters and events that are quite out of drawing. Classic they are, not in their form—that, compared with Turgenev's for instance, is immature and uncouth—but by virtue of their power. The modern novelist's gift of manipulation, though exercised only upon puppets, is not despicable; but we feel, in *Lucy* and *Sandra* and *Roy*, that the dust of humanity has been breathed on by a creator. Meredith views the elemental forces at the roots of our being in the light of a great poetic conception of life and its background. His dramas are not episodes merely; they include a horizon, they allow for the unuttered part of our speech; and this is probably the truth that has been aimed at in the comparison of his works with Shakespeare's. The flame of sunrise and sunset mingles inextricably with the love-making of *Richard* and *Lucy*. Meredith has given us later and more intellectual statements of kinship between Earth and her children; but here is its spontaneous artistic expression, broad in appeal because grounded in the commonest human experience—an expression moreover of which prose in no other hands has proved itself capable. "The tide of colour has ebbed from the upper sky. In the west the



sea of sunken fire draws back ; and the stars leap forth, and tremble, and retire before the advancing moon, who slips the silver train of cloud from her shoulders, and, with her foot upon the pine-tops surveys heaven. 'Lucy, did you never dream of meeting me?' 'O Richard! yes; for I remembered you.' 'Lucy! and did you pray that we might meet?' 'I did!' Young as when she looked upon the lovers in Paradise, the fair Immortal journeys onward. Fronting her, it is not night but veiled day. Full half the sky is flushed. Not darkness; not day: but the nuptials of the two. 'My own! my own for ever! You are pledged to me? Whisper!' He hears the delicious music. 'And you are mine?' A soft beam travels to the fern-covert under the pine-wood where they sit, and for answer he has her eyes: turned to him an instant, timidly fluttering over the depths of his, and downcast; for through her eyes her soul is naked to him. 'Lucy! my bride! my life!' The night-jar spins his dark monotony on the branch of the pine. The soft beam travels round them and listens to their hearts."

When we consider the age of its author, this maturity of workmanship seems striking enough, and no less so in the chapter entitled "Nursing the Devil," psychologically one of the finest in the book. But on the tragic heights of the story the art is equally supreme; above all in Richard's wandering, when he has just learned of his fatherhood, and in that great scene where the high-water mark of novelistic passion is reached—his last meeting and parting with Lucy. Richard, when Austin arrives and alludes to the birth of his boy, is in Nassau with Lady Judith Felle, his sentimentalist friend. The news scatters his vapours and brings him to life. He starts out by himself when a storm is impending; and mountain and forest, breathless silence, and rush and

thunder of tempest, serve as ministers and accompaniments to his awakening spirit. "A father . . . a child." In spite of his anguished repentance, alone there amid the grandeurs and mysteries of storm, he, the sole representative of humanity, feels himself greater than they. In conflict with the elements "his spirit rose, and marched, and exulted, let it be glory, let it be ruin! Lower down the lightened abysses of air rolled the wrathful crash: then white thrusts of light were darted from the sky, and great curving ferns, seen steadfast in pallor a second, were supernaturally agitated, and vanished. Then a shrill song roused in the leaves and the herbage. Prolonged and louder it sounded, as deeper and heavier the deluge pressed. A mighty force of water satisfied the desire of the earth. Even in this, drenched as he was by the first outpouring, Richard had a savage pleasure. Keeping in motion he was scarcely conscious of the wet, and the grateful breath of the weeds was refreshing. Suddenly he stopped short, lifting a curious nostril. He fancied he smelt meadow-sweet; he had never seen the flower in Rhineland—never thought of it; and it would hardly be met with in a forest. He was sure he smelt it fresh in dews. His little companion wagged a miserable wet tail some way in advance. He went on slowly, thinking indistinctly. After two or three steps he stooped and stretched out his hand to feel for the flower, having, he knew not why, a strong wish to verify its growth there. Groping about, his hand encountered something warm that started at his touch, and he, with the instinct we have, seized it, and lifted it to look at it. The creature was very small, evidently quite young. Richard's eyes, now accustomed to the darkness, were able to discern it for what it was, a tiny leveret, and he supposed that the dog had probably frightened its dam just before he

found it. He put the little thing on one hand in his breast, and stepped out rapidly as before. The rain was now steady; from every tree a fountain poured. So cool and easy had his mind become that he was speculating on what kind of shelter the birds could find, and how the butterflies and moths saved their coloured wings from washing. Folded close they might hang under a leaf, he thought. Lovingly he looked into the dripping darkness of the coverts on each side, as one of their children. Then he was musing on a strange sensation he experienced. It ran up one arm with an indescribable thrill, but communicated nothing to his heart. It was purely physical, ceased for a time, and recommenced, till he had it all through his blood, wonderfully thrilling. He grew aware that the little thing he carried in his breast was licking his hand there. The small rough tongue going over and over the palm of his hand produced this strange sensation he felt. Now that he knew the cause, the marvel ended; but now that he knew the cause, his heart was touched and made more of it. The gentle scraping continued without intermission as on he walked. What did it say to him? Human tongue could not have said so much just then. A pale grey light in the skirts of the flying tempest displayed the dawn. Richard was walking hurriedly. The green drenched weeds lay all about in his path, bent thick, and the forest drooped glimmeringly. Impelled as a man who feels a revelation mounting obscurely to his brain, Richard was passing one of those little forest-chapels, hung with votive wreaths, where the peasant halts to kneel and pray. Cold, still, in the twilight it stood, raindrops pattering round it. He looked within, and saw the Virgin holding her Child. He moved by. But not many steps had he gone ere his strength went out of him, and he

shuddered. What was it? He asked not. He was in other hands. Vivid as lightning the Spirit of Life illumined him. He felt in his heart the cry of his child, his darling's touch. With shut eyes he saw them both. They drew him from the depths; they led him a blind and tottering man. And as they led him he had a sense of purification so sweet he shuddered again and again. When he looked out from his trance on the breathing world, the small birds hopped and chirped; warm fresh sunlight was over all the hills. He was on the edge of the forest, entering a plain clothed with ripe corn under a spacious morning sky."

And this scene, moving though it be, is but as an antechamber to the scene where Richard has returned to his wife, the scene where the light in Lucy's eyes is like the light on a moving wave—changeeful, yet constantly radiant—and Richard, again and again asking if his confession has been understood, receives one answer only, and that in its turn no answer but a question: "But you love me? Richard! My husband! you love me?' 'Yes, I have never loved, I never shall love, woman but you.' 'Darling! Kiss me.' 'Have you understood what I have told you?' 'Kiss me,' she said. He did not join lips. 'I have come to you to-night to ask your forgiveness.' Her answer was still: 'Kiss me.' 'Can you forgive a man so base?' 'But you love me, Richard?' 'Yes: I can say that before God. I love you, and I have betrayed you, and am unworthy of you—not worthy to touch your hand, to kneel at your feet, to breathe the same air with you.' Her eyes shone brilliantly. 'You love me! you love me, darling!' And as one who has sailed through dark fears into daylight, she said, 'My husband! my darling! you will never leave me? We shall never be parted again?'" Of the immediate blighting of her hopes, of the terror of part-

ing, and the tragic outcome of it all, nothing can here be told. These events belong on a level where there is no place for language that is not inspired. Robert Louis Stevenson calls the parting scene between Richard and Lucy the strongest written in English since Shakespeare, and, though we may question the artistic justifiability of events so cruelly heart-rending, there can be no question as to the grandeur and exaltation of style in which they are treated. We are reminded of the comment of James Thomson's friend on another work of Meredith's: "Here truly are words that if you pricked them would bleed."

*The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* is not a wholly satisfactory book. It is blotted by a certain kind of ugliness, already suggested in connection with *Clare*, and exemplified further in Ripton's drunkenness after the wedding, the details of the picnic at Richmond, and in Mrs. Mountfalcon's relation to Richard. The writer's sense of the tragedy of human existence is so intense that it borders on cruelty; self-slain—his characters seem not the less almost hounded to ruin. But to realise the greatness of the work, we have only to reflect how intolerable the tale would become, shrunk to the canvas of an inferior writer. We may not think the story likeable, but we cannot, unless we are idiots, read and be blind to its power. In view of this the first of his novels we may question whether the author's outlook on life will grow broad-based enough to support his burden of feeling; but we know him already as a poet and not a transcriber—one who is not boxed in with his characters but sees them against a great background of earth and of air.



## CHAPTER V

### EVAN HARRINGTON AND THE EMPTY PURSE

*EVAN HARRINGTON*, which made its appearance as a serial in *Once a Week* for the year 1860, is the most entertaining of Meredith's stories. That it possesses qualities raising it high above the level of ordinary serials it is not necessary to state; but, nevertheless, it more nearly makes the appeal of the popular novel than does any other of Meredith's works. Readers unacquainted with his writings are usually advised to begin upon *Evan Harrington*, and the advice, generally speaking, is sound. Yet it needs qualification in reference to the reader's nature and aim; for it must be borne in mind that *Evan Harrington*, though easy to read and vastly diverting, cannot be compared with *Richard Feverel*, for instance, in the reward it offers. It is, of course, tender and wise in its playfulness, serious enough too in some places, but not with the elemental seriousness and wisdom that *The Ordeal* inwinds with the very springs of our being. And the root of the difference lies in the subject. Tested by the ordinary standards of fiction *Evan Harrington* would merely be noted as a striking success, but in relation to Meredith's novels it is necessary to add a remark as to the level on which that success is obtained—the level of circumstance and incident. These accidents Meredith of course moulds to his ends;

he emphasises distinctions in social position to reveal similarities in nature; but, nevertheless, his realities, his spiritual situations, depend upon these distinctions for their interest and strength.

The story is of a tailor's son, who, with the instincts and upbringing of a gentleman, finds himself, at his father's decease, bound to the business by debt. His mother—a remarkable woman enough—comes of the professional classes, but Evan Harrington's distinction descends to him from his father. When the story opens, the Great Mel is no longer living; but the whole atmosphere of the book is pervaded by his presence. Though neither his vice nor his virtue are on quite so heroic a scale, Melchisedec Harrington is Roy Richmond's forerunner; they meet in a common disdainfulness of money combined with requisition of the society and circumstance it brings: "Mr. Melchisedec had been at once the sad dog of Lymport and the pride of the town. He was a tailor, and he kept horses; he was a tailor, and he had gallant adventures; he was a tailor, and he shook hands with his customers. Finally, he was a tradesman, and he was never known to have sent in a bill." Throughout his life he had managed to preserve an attitude of respect to his wife; but the task had been difficult, owing to her sordid concern with matters of business and her practice of picking up the pence as he squandered the pounds. His four children—three daughters and a son—had been removed in their youth from the taint of the shop so far as that was possible; and, when the story begins, all the daughters are assured of social position by marriage, while, under their tutelage, Evan, a lad of seventeen, waiting an army commission, spends the hours "not devoted to his positive profession—that of gentleman—" in his brother-in-law's brewery, "toying



with big books and balances"; and is soon to be inveigled into false and ludicrous positions by his sister Louisa, who has obtained a Portuguese Count for her husband.

The vulgarity of the Countess de Saldar de Sancorvo—as by the end of the book she has come to style herself—is too exaggerated to be real; but the very fact that she possesses no psychological significance, is not indeed a credible character, leaves us free to ignore the depths of her coarseness and enjoy her endless manœuvres to the full. To these we are first introduced when, in company with Evan and her husband, who is a refugee, she attaches herself to a diplomatist's party returning from Lisbon to the metropolis. The Government sloop is boarded in the Thames by Goren, a tailor, who brings Evan news of his father's death. "I'm going down to-night," he proclaims, "to take care of the shop. He's to be buried in his old uniform. You had better come with me by the night-coach, if you would see the last of him, young man." The Countess is sincerely affected, but the word "shop" may have been overheard, and it must be retrieved. After a moment's strained silence the situation is saved by her outcry, "In his uniform!" Melchisedec had been in the Militia! She is a master of intrigue, and on her own ground it is not possible to outwit her, but she is, of course, outwitted in the end by the one factor she has no means to deal with—disinterested affection. Her failure, however, teaches her nothing but a change of tactics. And the book ends with a letter she writes to her sister from Rome: "Let the postmark be my reply to your letter received through the Consulate, and most courteously delivered with the Consul's compliments. We shall yet have an ambassador at Rome—mark your Louisa's words. Yes, dearest! I am here,

body and spirit! I have at last found a haven, a refuge, and let those who condemn me compare the peace of their spirits with mine. *You* think that you have quite conquered the dreadfulness of our origin. My love, I smile at you! I *know* it to be impossible for the Protestant heresy to offer a shade of consolation. Earthly-born, it rather *encourages* earthly distinctions. It is the sweet sovereign Pontiff alone who gathers all in his arms, not excepting tailors. Here, if they could know it, is their blessed comfort! . . . ”

The Countess, Jack Raikes, the Great Mel, and Tom Cogglesby are to be conceived as a Dickens-like background, throwing into prominence the reality and naturalness of Rose. Yet, in one aspect only; for, collectively, these eccentrics, and not Rose or her lover, form the outstanding feature of the book. Tom Cogglesby's birthday celebration at the Green Dragon is a scene memorable enough; but it is in Tom with Andrew at the Aurora, interviewing Lady Jocelyn, schooling Jack Raikes, that Meredith finds play for not the least significant of his powers. His Comic Spirit, for the moment, is embodied, to lie in wait for every impostor; and Raikes, “who represented one who was rehearsing a part he wished to act before the world, and was not aware he took the world into his confidence,” gives its ingenuities full play. Cogglesby's mind teems with whimsical notions for the exposure and correction of pretenders; notions not in any way vindictive, but outspoken and salutary; birth of a child heart and full-grown intelligence, and proof, if indeed any such proof were required, that Cogglesby's creator is in intimate touch with the Spirit of Comedy. And nowhere perhaps in the whole of Meredith's writing is his reading of life, his faith in Earth's meaning for those who are teachable, those who are fools but for a season,

better expressed than it is here in its earliest form. Love-sick and engrossed in his sorrow, Evan comes on a woman in extremity by the side of the road. "A misery beyond our own," comments his author, "is a wholesome picture for youth, and though we may not for the moment compare the deep with the lower deep, we, if we have a heart for outer sorrows, can forget ourselves in it. Evan had just been accusing the heavens of conspiracy to disgrace him. Those patient heavens had listened, as is their wont. They had viewed, and had not been disordered by his mental frenzies. It is certainly hard that they do not come down to us, and condescend to tell us what they mean, and be dumbfounded by the perspicuity of our arguments—the arguments, for instance, that they have not fashioned us for the science of the shears, and do yet impel us to wield them. Nevertheless, they to whom mortal life has ceased to be a long matter perceive that our appeals for conviction are answered—now and then very closely upon the call. When we have cast off the scales of hope and fancy, and surrender our claims on mad chance, it is given us to see that some plan is working out: that the heavens, icy as they are to the pangs of our blood, have been throughout speaking to our souls; and, according to the strength there existing, we learn to comprehend them. But their language is an element of Time, whom primarily we have to know."

Meredith's criticism of his poem *The Empty Purse, A Sermon to Our Later Prodigal Son*, has been quoted already. As a poem it is not possible to rank it highly, yet, as a deliberate avowal of ideas which are implicit in much of his writing, it has great value. Published in 1892, over thirty years after *Evan Harrington*, it is concerned with a similar theme. A penniless and destitute spend-

thrift is discovered on a wayside bank, his empty purse lying beside him for symbol of his material prospects, "quenched youth" the term by which he is addressed. His pitiable condition wins him no peace; a moralist is at hand who urges the desperation of the prodigal's case as a pretext for instant probing of his past. The youth's history, he says, must at once be questioned, his whole life summoned and reviewed. Memory's fullest aid is invoked, and it is found that a pampered childhood was succeeded by a season of passion in which, on account of his wealth, the world presented itself to the youth as a feast for his appetites. Hints and beckonings of loveliness had indeed visited him in boyhood, but none of the discipline needful for long and delicate quests had been his. Moreover, any support he might have received from conventional moralities was early withdrawn from him by the most insidious of corruptions :—

Some one said  
(Or was it the thought into hearing grew?)  
*Not thou as commoner men !*  
Thy stature puffed and it swayed,  
It stiffened to royal-erect ;  
A brassy trumpet brayed ;  
A whirling seized thy head ;  
The vision of beauty was flecked.  
Note well the how and the when,  
The thing that prompted and sped.

Much pains is spent in demonstrating to the prodigal that the homage of his satellites which served to foster this belief was given, not to himself, but to his well-stored purse. The hideous reality of the "carnivorous, cannibal" thing that he was is pictured with brutal distinctness. His wealth provided the weapons of prey; he has preyed disgracefully on his fellows, men and women alike; and it is his riches which are the source of the evil—riches which have been the ruin of him, and will be the ruin of others after him. For this is the

burden of the poem,—that circumstances which shelter from conflict and foster any assumption of superiority to his fellows are the greatest curse a man can carry. The sole wealth earth has to offer lies in knowledge won from experience. And thus this poverty, this nakedness that have descended on the youth—these indeed are not his ruin, but his golden opportunity, his first real chance in life. Hitherto he has been enchained, imprisoned, walled off by his riches from comradeship with his fellows. The Sorcerer Gold has had him in his grip :

But now from his cavernous hold,  
Free may thy soul be set,  
As a child of the Death and the Life, to learn,  
Refreshed by some bodily sweat,  
The meaning of either in turn,  
What issue may come of the two :—  
A morn beyond mornings, beyond all reach  
Of emotional arms at the stretch to enfold :  
A firmament passing our visible blue.

Inexperienced youth, in Meredith's view, represents little but energy, potentiality, either for good or for evil. He says of Evan, at the opening of his career : "He has little character for the moment. Most youths are like Pope's women ; they have no character at all." And in regard to another of his heroes he is even more explicit : "Wilfrid was a gallant fellow, with good stuff in him. But, he was young. Ponder on that pregnant word, for you are about to see him grow. He was less a coxcomb than shamefaced and sentimental ; and one may have these qualities and be a coxcomb to boot, and yet be a gallant fellow ; and harsh, exacting, double-dealing, and I know not what besides, in youth. The question asked by nature is, 'Has he the heart to take and keep an impression ?' For, if he has, circumstances will force him on and carve the figure of a brave man out of that mass of contradictions."<sup>1</sup> But at what

<sup>1</sup> *Sandra Belloni*, chap. XIII.



cost? At the price commonly of all the things he holds dearest on earth ; whereat he reproaches nature his creator, and circumstance his sculptor, forgetful that their sole duty was to make him a man. It is clear at the close of *Evan Harrington* that this duty is performed. Of the hero's honesty and manliness there is no longer a question ; he has clearly "struck earth" ; that is, he has grounded his efforts and ambition on the reality of his circumstance and character. And the necessity of this "saving grasp in the stern-exact" is the fundamental belief of the creator of General Ople and Clotilde von Rüdiger. A man or woman whose aspirations are not rooted in fact, the primary fact being the limitations of their own character, is, in Meredith's eyes, useless and worse. A man must see himself as he is, divested of all false and adventitious aids, and recognise exactly the nature of the raw material with which he has to work, before he can begin to weave the fabric of a life. In early days the shuttle may seem to cross and recross at a furious pace ; but, until a pattern has been chosen and the threads selected and controlled to some determined end, there will be no issue upon the loom. For the possibilities of self-deception, of unreality, of confusion between sentiment and emotion, are almost unlimited. Evan reclining in his chariot, on his way to his father's funeral, believing himself to be meditating upon Love and Death, sees a halo cast about Tailor-dom and is able to despise the opinion of the world that looks down on it. Yet presently, when he finds he has not money enough for his postillion's tip, and sees himself consequently lowered in one man's estimation, his pride is up in arms. "To be asked for what he does not possess, to be seen beggared, and to be claimed a debtor—alack !" Yet the Fates that are at work on the moulding of Evan find that he can "take an im-

pression." He has been deceiving himself and attitudinising before Rose Jocelyn, and this experience with the postillion gives him a first glimpse of the truth: "From the vague sense of being an impostor, he awoke to the fact that he was likewise a fool." None the less, arrived at his destination, he informs his father's creditors in the lordliest manner that their accounts will be paid to the last farthing, without pausing to estimate either their number or the nature and degree of sacrifice of himself that are involved. Evan has shown himself capable of taking an impression, of self-criticism: the severer task of learning to keep it, to remodel his habits upon it, lies before him still. Yet his lesson is learned and with swiftness. And the reason of that swiftness Meredith would have us inquire. In part, of course, it is due to favourable predispositions in Evan's nature, but it is due, in the main, to the weight of the sculptor's hand upon him; to the fact that his conditions are the very opposite of those of the gilded youth of the poem.

Even the hero of *The Empty Purse* is to prove himself manly at last; but Meredith would have us believe that throughout he might have been a good fellow enough, had it not been for

Grandmotherly Laws  
Giving rivers of gold to our young,  
In the days of their hungers impure.

In this connection Mr. Trevelyan has already quoted the diatribe of the democratic German professor who calls Harry Richmond to account for the intellectual sluggishness of his class. The true place for youth in our present conflict of parties and interests is, Meredith believes, on the side of social progress and experiment,

As a Tentative, combating Peace,  
Our lullaby word for decay.



But inheritance of wealth, he says, almost invariably leads the inheritor to rank himself with the defenders of privilege, the opponents of change and reform. This Prodigal, who is now about to take his right place in the fray, in the days of his wealth has been

A conservative youth ! who the cream-bowl skimmed,  
Desiring affairs to be left as they are.

Life, he will find, is an art ; and much remains yet to be learned ; but,

Rubbing shoulder to shoulder, as only the book  
Of the world can be read, by necessity urged,

at last the conditions of learning are his ; and moreover—for *The Empty Purse* is more than a variation of Meredith's constant theme of the necessity of self-knowledge and self-discipline—this special experience of his must be held as a trust for his kind. This youth condemned to disaster by parental stupidity is called on to testify against the mistake from which he has suffered, to inveigh against the laws that protect

Men's right of bequeathing their all to their own  
(With little regard to the creatures they squeezed)

as relics of a non-spiritual past and the childhood of the race. But the task will not be easy ; for hitherto the most idealistic of men have considered that money should be one item at least of their children's inheritance ; and the mass of mankind make hoarding for their successors one of the chief aims of their lives. But contumely is not to be dreaded ;

'Tis the portion of them who civilize,  
Who speak the word novel and true.

Courage and persistence needful for the task are to be drawn from a comprehensive vision. Measuring the present degree of civilisation against the savage infancy of our race, the day when "our forefather hoof did its

work in the wood," we shall cease to be distrustful of change, we shall press forward to a time when man's soul shall have conquered his brutishness and brain rule supreme over force. Much has been accomplished by our ancestors, but true reverence for their efforts must be shown in accepting our responsibility for further development, and pressing on towards ideals as yet unachieved. And when we have compassed this real understanding of the past, it will blossom in passionate feeling for the future and the lives yet to be. Man has confused pleasure and luxury till he has come to look upon them as identical. But the sources of pleasure are, in fact, common and inexhaustible, and when these are exalted to their true place and preferred to luxuries only attainable by the few, money at last will assume its real and comparatively elementary significance. That day will bring to mankind joys that are now unimagined and unimaginable. The goal is afar; but meanwhile—and it is one of Meredith's chief claims as an idealist on our attention that he always has a meanwhile—if we are to lift Earth heavenwards, we must look to the foundations on which our structure is to be reared. And to this end he urges on individuals the need for closer contact with the hearts of their fellows and a deeper intimacy with nature; urges it in terms not merely didactic but with something at least of the emotional stimulus of poetry.

The God in the conscience of multitudes feel,  
And we feel deep to Earth at her heart,  
We have her communion with men,  
New ground, new skies for appeal.  
Yield into harness thy best and thy worst;  
Away on the trot of thy servitude start,  
Through the rigours, and joys and sustainments of air.  
If courage should falter, 'tis wholesome to kneel.  
Remember that well, for the secret with some,  
Who pray for no gift, but have cleansing in prayer,

And free from impurities, tower-like stand.  
I promise not more, save that feasting will come  
To a mind and a body no longer inversed.  
The sense of large charity over the land,  
Earth's wheaten of wisdom dispensed in the rough,  
And a bell ringing thanks for a sustenance meal  
Through the active machine : lean fare,  
But it carries a sparkle !

It is, however, in the last stanza of all that the characteristically penetrative analogy—the truly Meredithian quality—is apparent. Who but Meredith, it may justly be asked, would have attempted this lengthy political exposition in verse? But who else, it may as justly be answered, could crown such complicated sermonising with an image so culminating and incisive?

Our season of drought is reminder rude :—  
No later than yesternoon,  
I looked on the horse of a cart,  
By the wayside water-trough.  
How at every draught of his bride of thirst  
His nostrils widened ! The sight was good :  
Food for us, food, such as first  
Drew our thoughts to earth's lowly for food.

## CHAPTER VI

### MODERN LOVE

*MODERN LOVE* appeared in 1862, eleven years after the *Poems*, and three years after the publication of *Richard Feverel*. Mr. Swinburne's letter in reply to the *Spectator's* adverse review of the poem has long been renowned. But half a century has passed, and a plea that the work is of complex delicacy, demanding serious and considerate estimation, is apt to fall flat on the ears of a generation which knows little of the battles by which its heritage was won. Yet Mr. Swinburne's challenge has a vigour and generosity characteristic of him, and some at least of his words time has not staled: "A more perfect piece of writing no man alive has ever turned out than the sonnet beginning, 'We saw the swallows gathering in the sky'"; and again: "Work of such subtle strength, such depth of delicate power, such passionate and various beauty; in some points, as it seems to me, a poem above the aim and beyond the reach of any but its author."

In the last forty years the literary critics at any rate have come round to Mr. Swinburne's opinion. They have decided also to follow him in the minor, but in its effect very important, matter of nomenclature. A painter, speaking to painters, may call red blue, taking it for granted that the dominant quality is as apparent to his hearers as himself; and a poet may speak of the

sections of *Modern Love* as if they were sonnets. Nor is it necessary to cavil at a master-poet's employment of the term in a journal whose readers may be supposed acquainted with literary forms, in order to protest against it as misleading to a general and indiscriminating public. Mr. Le Gallienne, indeed, after discussing the question at length, comes to an opposite conclusion. But the value of the conclusion is impaired by a strange supposition that underlies his argument. He writes throughout as though it had been suggested that Meredith could not have written *Modern Love* in a series of sonnets if he would. In face of the fact that Meredith has produced elsewhere sonnets worthy to rank among the greatest in our language, we may be allowed to dismiss this supposition as irrelevant. The truth is, that in using the word sonnet we are obscuring rather than exalting the refinement of the work. The fifty divisions of *Modern Love* contain sixteen lines each, and these lines are divided into quatrains; the first and fourth, and the second and third lines of each quatrain rhyming. All that these separate sections have in common with the sonnet is the length of their lines and the pithiness of their expression; they have nothing of its complexity or finality of structure. In many cases, notably in XVIII and XIX, XXI and XXII, XXIII and XXIV, the last four lines of one section might quite well be placed above the first four of the next. In part the poem is pure narrative, and the treatment of the theme is necessarily continuous. The divisions are roughly comparable to chapters, serviceable in allowing for alterations of scale or changes of aspect, but sometimes merely divisions. For the author's object in simplifying and modifying the sonnet-form has been to secure, with the advantage of divisional variety, a flowing, almost a processional

continuity of dramatic effect ; a continuity which would have been destroyed by greater complexity in structure.

A distinction is to be drawn in Meredith's writing between avoidable and unavoidable obscurities. Of poems in which the obscurities are almost wholly of the latter kind no better example is to be found than *Modern Love*. In phrasing it is not obscure, the wording is perfectly straightforward and direct ; the difficulty lies in the matter and not in the manner. What, we should ask ourselves, exactly is the theme ? It is concerned certainly with "the usual three," husband and wife and lover, and their acts are, on the whole, of a regrettably commonplace order. But these acts and deeds are not the subject of the poem ; they form merely a groundwork generally taken for granted. The subject is the mental atmosphere and experience arising from these, the fruit of knowledge and insight coming out of elements earthly enough in themselves. The difficulty of comprehension lies in the fact that the poems of *Modern Love* give, not a narrative, but a running commentary on a narrative, which is told by implication only ; and the difficulty is increased by the fact that a large number of the poems, even in isolation, are singularly beautiful ; separate elevations, so satisfying to the reader's vision, that he is apt to rest content with their acquaintance without complying with the demand on his imagination for a ground-plan which shall relate and solidify the whole. Yet, because that demand on the reader is real, any true exposition of the poem may not escape from an attempt to provide it. The task is by no means alluring, because its aim must be to supply the unexalted and non-poetic elements which are without place in the poem. There is a danger, too, in the undertaking ; for it was no part of Meredith's object in dealing with the most intricate



and intimate of human problems to provide placards that whoso runs may read, or garbage for persons nosing in the mire. Yet it is necessitated, because he has presumed more than the imagination of ordinarily intelligent readers has proved itself able to afford.

Meredith's achievement lies in the fact that he has exalted to poetical heights the surroundings and effects of a calamity in the life of every day. His commentary on the situation raises it to tragedy, and makes us slow to discover that it is hardly tragic in itself. Yet this is a truth to which the most magnificent and poetic of the sonnets bear witness. For they invariably escape from the bounds of the narrative to comments and conclusions which transcend the circumstances. The philosophy and the workmanship of *Modern Love* are worthy of the writer's maturity; the underlying story—the skeleton—is inadequate, the offspring of his youth, an inadequacy for which he, surely, has atoned most generously in prefacing the second edition (1892) with a poem laying stress on the spiritual and immaterial issues, and in adding *The Sage Enamoured and the Honest Lady* to the volume. It is only necessary to consider the first poem and the last of the great series in order to recognise the inadequacy of the plot, not only to Meredith's later and maturer thought, but to its original purpose.

## I

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:  
That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,  
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed,  
Were called into her with a sharp surprise,  
And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,  
Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay  
Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away  
With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes

Her giant heart of Memory and Tears  
 Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat  
 Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet  
 Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,  
 By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.  
 Like sculptured effigies they might be seen  
 Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between ;  
 Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

## L

Thus piteously Love closed what he begat :  
 The union of this ever-diverse pair !  
 These two were rapid falcons in a snare,  
 Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.  
 Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,  
 They wandered once ; clear as the dew on flowers :  
 But they fed not on the advancing hours :  
 Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.  
 Then each applied to each that fatal knife,  
 Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.  
 Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul  
 When hot for certainties in this our life !—  
 In tragic hints here see what evermore  
 Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,  
 Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,  
 To throw that faint thin line upon the shore !

Might we not fairly have supposed from these that the intervening poems would be concerned, not with deception on the part of one of the actors and petty jealousy and retaliation on the part of the other, but with some tragedy of inevitable loss, of wholly dreaded and only half-merited pain, of loneliness outlasting love? The truth is that in these and many similar poems in the series the writer outsoars the conception he has formulated, and moves on a plane in which some at least of the antics he describes elsewhere<sup>1</sup> can find no place.

For, in the tale as it actually is, "he," the husband, is maddened by discovering that his wife is spiritually unfaithful to him, and in love with another man. The

<sup>1</sup> See xv, xxxvi, xlv.

story is told throughout by the husband, who describes his reactions of feeling beneath the mask of a polite demeanour—how at one moment he is enraged by his wife's grace of manner and bearing into regarding her as the vilest spot on a blackened earth, at another strives in reactionary gentleness for magnanimity, while, in remorse for the sterner feeling, he learns the bitterness of his pain. From thought of his wife he turns to "the man," her would-be lover, first to call him negligible—a worm to be trodden under foot—then to writhe at perceiving him irradiated by her gaze. The power of that look to glorify what it falls upon drives him to half curse the beauty that holds him bound, and in the same breath to question why he foregoes its sweetness—"It cannot be such harm on her cool brow to put a kiss?" But no! He has been deceived. The object of his love exists no longer—"The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!" He attempts to turn for relief to other interests, but life has gone out of them all. Illusion or diversion lasts for a moment only, and his agony revives the fiercer for its lull. But he is not a sensational being merely; half the poignancy of his suffering lies in the fact that he is at war with himself, that his intellect has a standard to which his senses prevent his actions from conforming. Into his wife's interest in household affairs he reads hypocrisy and scheming. He sees her using her beauty as a net to ensnare him, and the acute temptation of allurements by which he is almost beguiled increases his bitterness. But she is befooled too. Her eyes have been trained for shining, not for use; and they have not enough penetration to discover the existence of a force that avails to restrain the impulse she is appealing to. A chance endearment of his is met, not with womanly shame, but in a

way only suggesting that her love has cooled. With sounds of midnight sobbing in his ears, knowing her feeling to be intensely alive and only the object of it changed, he stings himself with thoughts of her wantonness and the title her conduct might warrant him in using. But all the while this agony is beneath the surface, an under-current at the fireside where they sit—"she laughing at a quiet joke"; for the decencies and appearances of their outward life are being strenuously upheld. Her radiant beauty pursues him continually, driving him to believe that her faithlessness is the more criminal for having avoided the

VII most obvious expression, and taunting him from  
VIII one extreme of feeling to the other. At times he is  
passionately pitiful, caring more for her lost loyalty  
IX than his own pain, at others marvelling that the  
wild beast within him does not seek its brute revenge.  
X Where, and what, he asks, is the nature of the crime  
that has brought this wretchedness upon him? Merely  
that he has slept and wakened; and waking, refused  
to act upon the impulse of a dream. The beauty  
XI of earth and returning spring serve only to intensify  
his consciousness of loss. In imagination, he points  
his wife to the golden west, where "in an amber  
cradle near the sun's decline" is lying the infant love  
XII that she has slain. But the greatest of her crimes  
is not that she has stripped him of the future; she  
has robbed him of the past. For it is a reality no  
longer, though the shadow of its mockery goes with  
XIII him for ever. And here again the contrast of man's  
life with nature's makes itself felt. Why, he asks,  
can we not learn of her whose care is for Seasons  
not Éternities, and who bestows no regret upon her  
fading flowers? Life lived only in the present, without  
memory or desire—that surely must be the way of

escape? And yet the analogy is not complete ; for the human rose—love rooted and renewed in sense—is a flower of surpassing loveliness.

A fourth actor in the drama is now introduced. The husband turns for solace to a friend, known throughout the rest of the poem as "My Lady," in distinction from "Madam," his wife. The immediate result is that contempt for "Madam" is aroused by signs in her of a veering fit and jealous renewal of affection. This new element of scorn is perhaps intended to serve as excuse for the next poem, surely one of the most unpleasant in the series, in which he awakes his wife from sleep or from pretence of sleep, to show two letters both in her own handwriting, one written long ago to himself, the other lately : "The words are very like : the name is new." Meanwhile, they still appear to the world as the happiest of couples. His wife shines as a hostess and his guests are excellently entertained—"they see no ghost." This game of Hiding the Skeleton has a certain zest, and the players begin to admire one another's acting. The husband at times is tempted to envy the uncomplicated lives of the country bumpkins dancing on the green, till he reflects upon the sources of their enjoyment. Torn by conflicting impulses towards gentleness and cruelty—reflecting that to escape from inconstancy to one person by forging vows to another is the road by which love drifts into the market-place—he concludes that the only really enviable condition must be that of the village idiot. His attempt to view the situation impartially is further complicated by the discovery of "a wanton-scented tress" in a long-unused desk of his own, which serves as reminder of deeds for which he, on his side, stands in need of forgiveness. One evening a friend, who has scoffed at lovers hitherto,

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stands with them on the lawn and begins the tale of his "most wondrous she" and, "convinced that words of wedded lovers must bring good," entreats their blessing. Forgetful for an instant of his presence, their eyes meet in horror. Then, recovering themselves quickly, they give what he requires. But a moment later the wife falls fainting to the ground, and the irony of the bystander's probable reading of the event flashes through her husband's mind. Soon it becomes evident to him that she is hovering on the brink of some confession ;

xxii her movements are irresolute and tentative, and once she stands before him in tears. But words do not come. Her husband will not question, and a gulf that seems impassable yawns between them. Christmas

xxiii arrives, and they are together at a country-house overflowing with guests ; they share an attic bedroom, and from the accident that brings them thus together, learn how wide the estrangement, how deep the mortification that divides them. The husband sets himself to freeze with the freezing cold outside : it is more than his wife can bear. But he steels his heart

xxiv against tokens of her suffering. Her offence he knows is only against love ; but he persuades himself that a grosser sin would have been easier to forgive. He will not be propitiated by signs of her unhappiness, though he has to call loudly on his sense of dignity in order to dismiss his longing. He questions her ironically as to her distaste for a French novel she is

xxv reading. Why does she pronounce it unnatural ? because the heroine is compelled to choose between her husband and her lover, and chooses as a woman should ? — unromantic possibly, but true to life ! Musing on the serpent which has taken love's place in

xxvi his heart, any consciousness of his own shortcoming forsakes him, and he thinks only of the wrong which



has been done to him. It is, he believes, still possible to pardon the doer of it, if she will fling her cowardice to the winds and make frank and free confession ; but he has no help to lend her : " You that made love bleed, you must bear all the venom of his tooth."

Nervous and unstrung, he determines to fall in with his doctor's prescription, and seek distraction xxvii wherever it may offer. He is inclined to be on good terms with the devil, who proves friendly when no other helper is at hand, and he begins a period of dalliance with " My Lady" in a spirit of pure devilry xxviii and cynicism. But because in the past he has had true feeling for this friend, his flirtation develops into something more vital, and the reality of his outcry xxix on what the relation is not bears witness to his having discovered exactly what it is. In the light of this knowledge he begins to generalise on the growth and nature of love. But though his words are brilliant, his xxx estimate is cynical, and amounts to little that he has not formulated earlier in the poem. Love is a dream—an illusion—and, when it crumbles, man does best to recognise himself as an animal with animal desires, and employ his intelligence in satisfying them scientifically. He will act on his theory, and, instead of sentimental romancing, a relentless statement of fact shall form his sonnet to his lady's eyes. But she is intelligent and capable of facing realities ; she has " that rare gift xxxi to beauty, Common Sense," and in their intercourse his spirit begins to revive. Relationship with her has unique qualities. He insists repeatedly on this, trying hard to persuade himself that it embraces and supersedes the old. He dwells on the charms that his Lady adds to her intelligence, and yet the truth xxxii will out. The episode is unreal ; he knows that his wife's place has not been taken ; he is inwardly torn

and fretted by living memories, "a dying something, never dead." He begins to suspect that the cure for the wound his wife has dealt does not lie with any other member of her sex. But his nerves are all on edge, and he extracts a certain cynical pleasure from the thought of her bewilderment should she chance

xxxiii to spy upon his letters to his friend; he writes in one of the inevitable soiling to a man's soul incurred in a hand-to-hand tussle with the devil. The wife, meanwhile, has determined on a discussion of the

xxxiv whole situation, in the hope that some understanding between them may be reached. But his interval of cynical enjoyment and would-be detachment from emotion has left him in no mood for passionate interviews, so he freezes her with commonplaces and conventional courtesies, and "Niagara, or Vesuvius, is deferred."

xxxv Yet he is a little uneasy under the muteness he has again compelled, and, later, the feeling is increased by his wife's suggestion, under cover of a game of forfeits, that the game they play is hardly worth the cost. The action of the next two poems maintains the conventional level on which he has in-

xxxvi sisted. "My Lady" and "Madam" are introduced, and their probing of one another's deficiencies, under cover of appreciative comment, affords amusement to the man who stands between them. The actors are next seen merged in a company of persons promenading a

xxxvii garden terrace before dinner. In the harmonious and discreet atmosphere that surrounds them all violence seems far off and unreal. Though within sound of his wife's voice and, in the course of his paces with his partner, catching constant glimpses of his Lady, the husband questions the existence of a problem: "Our tragedy," he asks, "is it alive or dead?" But the reality of conflict and of feeling is quickly re-

asserted when, in evident compunction, his friend urges him to return to his wife. For in one of the finest poems of the series he implores his Lady to allow him to retain in her his one spiritual anchorage; the bond with his wife is broken past mending, and the only remaining choice for him is between love and vileness. The Pity of which she speaks has, he says, no place; his wife is like a child, who merely values a thing because it is destroyed and is no longer to be had. To counsel him to return to her is to drive him to evil. To his argument and his passion his Lady yields, and there follows one golden hour of moonlight and of song in which at last his "bride of every sense" seems found. Once more his spirit is attuned to harmonies of earth and air, and the lovers stand half-dreaming beside a rippling brook. They are in shadow when a man and woman appear. Intruders! who are they? he asks, little thinking what the answer is to be. "The woman bears my name and honour. Their hands touch!" Headlong, all the old riot and confusion have returned; in a frenzy of feeling the husband is once more helplessly adrift.

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Peace is not to be attained by recourse to one "inflammable to love as fire to wood," yet his new ecstasy is paralysed by fear that his old love is vital still. The ground rocks under his feet; he can be certain of nothing—only he recognises that the episode with "My Lady" has solved nothing, and indirectly half perceives his wife's worth through the eyes of her lover. At any rate, some attempt at reconciliation is imperative; beyond that he cannot see, but so far he is determined. The attempt is made, but, unblest by love, their kisses drive them further apart. And in the cruel east wind of the next morning he wanders on the seashore, imagining the meeting-ground of wind

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and wave as the burial-place of love defiled. Where or whose the fault he cannot tell, but the evil he so dreaded has come upon him. His bitterness has gone, but he is linked to his wife henceforth by pity, not  
XLIV by love. He does his best to hide the change, but she perceives it and will not rest content. The price of love she feels has been paid, and she has not insight enough to find the key to a new and deeper estrangement. To her mind the sole explanation of her husband's coldness lies in the existence of her rival; he gathers a rose, and she asks him for it to  
XLV grind it underfoot, convinced that it is in some way associated with his forbidden love. And so the days go on, until at last the awful silence is broken by an unexpected incident. Unable one morning to find his wife, he goes half-involuntarily to seek her in the copse which was the scene of their courtship. He finds her there with her lover and, going forward, offers her his arm, ignoring the presence of a third. She accepts it without embarrassment, and her lover passes shadow-like and unnoticed from their view. He feels that his wife is on the brink of explanatory speech, and, before the words can be framed, he declares his full confidence in her. The storm and stress of their conflict is over, and for a moment at least their lives  
XLVII are irradiated by an afterglow of their passion. While the swallows are gathering in the evening air, they stand together surrounded by an atmosphere of gentleness and peace. The husband is able at last to speak with honesty and openness; all that is to be said  
XLVIII they say. But, alas for woman's nature! his wife cannot perceive his meaning; her judgment and her sensations are too closely intertwined, and, when he introduces his Lady's name, she is deaf to all else. She breaks away from him, fixed in her idea that she

must set him free to seek her rival. Argument is useless, but none the less he follows and finds her on the seashore. She takes his hand and seems XLIX amenable to his control, happy too in his solicitude, though less vital than her wont. Some change has come over her; midnight brings the key. She calls her husband and asks for his embrace. She has taken poison.

An analysis intentionally restricted to the actualities the poem presupposes, can give no conception of its beauty and scope. And even in regard to the drama itself a distinction should be drawn between the spiritual atmosphere of the last ten divisions and that of the preceding forty. In XLV and XLVI there are momentary reactions to a lower level, but, on the whole, the story, in these concluding poems, touches and moves on a higher plane. The characters make real efforts at disentanglement, and their hopes for reconciliation are baffled by forces deeper and more complicated than wilfulness. The language of metaphor rises in beauty and power with the theme, till it culminates in an image embodying the conflicting majesty and futility of human endeavour, and the poet sets the crown upon his vision of mortality. In this closing quatrain thought and metaphor are matched, and both are at their zenith. And the poem which forms at once the resting-place and the bridge between the passion of the past and the pitifulness of the future, is of an exquisite, almost magical, reflectiveness:

We saw the swallows gathering in the sky,  
And in the osier-isle we heard their noise.  
We had not to look back on summer joys,  
Or forward to a summer of bright dye:  
But in the largeness of the evening earth  
Our spirits grew as we went side by side.  
The hour became her husband and my bride.  
Love that had robbed us so, thus blessed our dearth!



The pilgrims of the year waxed very loud  
In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood  
Full brown came from the West, and like pale blood  
Expanded to the upper crimson cloud.  
Love that had robbed us of immortal things,  
This little moment mercifully gave,  
Where I have seen across the twilight wave  
The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.



## CHAPTER VII

### SANDRA BELLONI AND VITTORIA

**S***ANDRA BELLONI*, published in 1864 as *Emilia in England*, possesses an intensity of theme which fuses the leading characteristics of Meredith's thought, and shows us the springs of his feeling at their source. Emilia is a revelation, an unveiling, as it were, of an ideal; and all the persons she directly touches, Tracy Runningbrook, Merthyr, Wilfrid, Lady Charlotte, even Mr. Pole and Mr. Pericles, are lit with her fire. With her as the pivot, they move within the radius of Meredith's genius, the central circle of feeling in which his touch never errs. But the characters outside this circle are many; and so lengthy is the treatment accorded to some of them, we cannot but suspect they were meant to be inside it. The sisters Pole, in spite of the complexity with which they are analysed, belong to the same class as the Ladies Culmer and Busshe—the large class of Meredith's unvitalised characters; they are not individuals, they form collectively the middle distance between the real persons and the background. Viewed thus, as representing the "fine shades," the "nice feelings," they are excellent; but long before Mrs. Chump offers Emilia a sovereign for information as to who pairs with who and what the sisters are meaning, we weary of their manœuvres as well as of their author's efforts to make us think of them separately. And though some of Mrs. Chump's

doings, notably the scene in which Braintop is employed in writing her letter to the Poles, are extremely funny, she is not on the whole very credible, and her departed husband mere caricature. Edward Buxley and Sir Twickenham Pryme, even Captain Gambier and Purcell Barrett, are little more than lay figures. Yet in view of the heart of the story, we begin to question whether this want of vitalisation has not a use. Housemaids allege that sunshine puts their fires out; Emilia reduces these persons to shadows, and glows among them like a star.

It is not easy to understand why devotees of "The Pilgrim's Scrip," and admirers of Meredith's teaching, do not more commonly particularise *Sandra Belloni* as among the richest mines of his wisdom. Nowhere are the gems of his insight more lavishly scattered. There is sparkling literary criticism and comment, only not dwelt upon here because it has place in a subsequent chapter. Beyond this, and over and above an abundance of comparatively isolated aphorisms, there is the Philosopher's running exposition of Wilfrid as "A Rider on Hippogriff," one who, because he travels to Love by the road of Sentiment, finds he is bestriding a power extraneous to himself. "The sentimentalist," the Philosopher says, "goes on accumulating images and hiving sensations, till such time as (if the stuff be in him) they assume a form of vitality and hurry him headlong. This is not passion, though it amazes men and does the madder thing." It is Hippogriff's practice to catch up his rider into mid-air, not however in order to make him cup-bearer among the celestials, but merely to remove him from all influences save the voice of his desire, and to secure a sea of vapour for his plungings. "Another peculiarity of this animal gifted with wings is, that around the height he soars to he can see no

barriers or any of the fences raised by men. And here again he differs from Passion, which may tug against common sense, but is never in a great nature divorced from it." True Passion, the Philosopher says, is "Noble Strength on Fire"; it violates no law; it is sane. Constantly just to itself, it does not when it is thwarted turn and rend its possessor. "Constantly just to itself, mind! This is the quality of true passion. Those who make a noise, and are not thus distinguishable are upon Hippogriff." Hippogriff is "the foal of Fiery Circumstance out of Sentiment." Passion and Sentiment—it is, Meredith tells us, his Philosopher's purpose to work out the distinction between them. "All I wish," he humorously adds, "is that it were good for my market. What the Philosopher means, is to plant in the reader's path a staring contrast between my pet Emilia and his puppet Wilfrid. It would be very commendable and serviceable if a novel were what he thinks it: but all attestation favours the critical dictum that a novel is to give us copious sugar and no cane. . . . Such is the construction of my story, however, that to entirely deny the Philosopher the privilege he stipulated for when with his assistance I conceived it, would render our performance unintelligible to that acute and honourable minority which consents to be thwacked with aphorisms and sentences and a fantastic delivery of the verities. While my Play goes on, I must permit him to come forward occasionally. We are indeed in a sort of partnership, and it is useless for me to tell him that he is not popular and destroys my chance."

This frank avowal of the intrusion of theory cannot, we feel, have been very difficult to Emilia's creator, who must have been perfectly aware that he had given to her and to Wilfrid vitality enough to fill and overflow the Philosopher's formulæ. Wilfrid, as opposed to

Emilia, may serve for a sentimentalist, but the man who charged with a ball-riddled white umbrella in the battle of Novara, and suffered degradation and insult in saving Emilia and her husband from their enemies, is something greater and nobler than that. Meredith's earliest plea for our patience with his hero has been quoted already.<sup>1</sup> It is reiterated even more solemnly later, when the struggle between Wilfrid's love and his self-interest has really begun. "The two men composing most of us at the outset of actual life," he says, "began their deadly wrestle within him, both having become awakened. If they wait for circumstance, that steady fire will fuse them into one, who is commonly a person of some strength; but throttling is usually the custom between them, and we are used to see men of murdered halves. These men have what they fought for: they are unaware of any guilt that may be charged against them, though they know that they do not embrace Life; and so it is that we have vague discontent too universal. Change, O Lawgiver! the length of our minority, and let it not end till this battle is thoroughly fought out in approving daylight." The whole family of Poles, including their father, are in some degree imaginative and therefore, consciously or unconsciously, subject to what in this connection Meredith terms the "poetic" power. Wilfrid is most markedly so, and it is indeed this combination of susceptibility to beauty, with want of unification and endurance of feeling, which marks him out as the Philosopher's prey. His susceptibility to beauty is evident enough. Emilia is the antithesis of his preconceived ideal; yet from their first moment of meeting she is able to be at her best, to breathe and expand, in his presence. From the day of her arrival at Brookfield he is her constant and kindly companion, pitiful even when

<sup>1</sup> Chapter v, page 54.

his sentiment is disturbed by revelation of her past, and he has to listen to thrifty regrets in regard to her father's misuse of potatoes, the staple food of her family. More delicate tenderness makes itself felt on their walk to Brookfield together, after the fight between Hillford and Ipley, when he shows himself as capable as Emilia of being attuned to the loveliness of earth. "A pillar of dim silver rain fronts the moon" as they hurry over the common away from the riot. Emilia's head is bowed, and Wilfrid still grasps the hand by which he has drawn her from under the tent. To get her out of the fray and to persuade her to forsake the ruins of her harp, Wilfrid has informed her that he, and not Mr. Pericles, was its donor, and that he will give her another. But when they have come for some distance and he sees that Emilia is in tears, he proposes that she shall wait in a cottage near by while he returns for the remains of the instrument. It is, he says, possible that it can be mended. "Emilia lifted her eyes. 'I am not crying for the harp. If you go back I must go with you.' 'That's out of the question. You must never be found in that sort of place again.' 'Let us leave the harp,' she murmured. 'You cannot go without me. Let me sit here for a minute. Sit with me.' She pointed to a place beside herself on the fork of a dry log under flowering hawthorn. A pale, shadowy blue centre of light among the clouds told where the moon was. Rain had ceased, and the refreshed earth smelt all of flowers, as if each breeze going by held a nosegay to their nostrils." A marked change has come over Emilia; "her voice now, even in common speaking, had that vibrating richness which in her singing swept his nerves." "How brave you are!" she presently exclaims, and all his efforts to persuade her that there was no danger in the recent struggle prove unavailing. Wilfrid falls back on



the statement that the right place for girls is at home. "‘I should always like to be where . . .’ Her voice flowed on with singular gravity to that stop." Is it possible she can have been going to say, like always to be where he, Wilfrid, was? The question is put more from curiosity than anything else; for as yet his emotions are languid. "To her soft ‘Yes,’ he continues briskly, and in the style of condescending fellowship: ‘Of course we’re not going to part!’ ‘I wonder,’ said Emilia. There she sat, evidently sounding right through the future with her young brain, to hear what Destiny might have to say." Touched, but conscious that he has now heard more than is justifiable, Wilfrid makes a last effort to return to a commonplace level. He reminds Emilia that she has an exaggerated notion of the fight in the booth, and that what honours there were in her rescue he shares with Captain Gambier. "‘I did not see him,’ said Emilia. ‘Are you not cold?’ he asked, for a diversion, though he had one of her hands. She gave him the other. He could not quit them abruptly: nor could he hold them both without being drawn to her. ‘What is it you say?’ Wilfrid whispered. ‘Men kiss us when we are happy. Is that right? and are you happy?’ She lifted a clear, full face, to which he bent his mouth. Over the flowering hawthorn the moon stood like a wind-blown white rose of the heavens. The kiss was given and taken. Strange to tell, it was he who drew away from it almost bashfully, and with new feelings." Down green lanes and through dim meadow paths their way is continued, till they come to a stream distant but two or three fields from Brookfield. Emilia has just been confessing that, earlier in the evening, she had been arranging with Captain Gambier to take her to Italy. The brook is crossed by a plank, and as they come to it Wilfrid has asked her when she



is starting, adding, in reply to her look, "with Captain Gambier, I mean." Emilia gives him her hand to be led over, and answers, as she comes near to him, "I am never to leave *you*." Her trustfulness subdues him completely, and he vows that she shall not. But Brookfield is coming in sight, and to confront it he feels the need for Emilia's fascination to be fully exerted. He bids her sing. She stops, and gathers breath twice, but each time her voice breaks on the note. She cannot. But in fear of his anger she takes his hand to beg for forgiveness. "Wilfrid locked her fingers in a strong pressure, and walked on, silent as a man who has faced one of the veiled mysteries of life. It struck a full human blow on his heart, dragging him out of his sentimental pastures precipitately. He felt her fainting voice to be the intensest love-cry that could be uttered. The sound of it coursed through his blood, striking a rare illumination of sparks in his not commonly brilliant brain." Elsewhere Wilfrid is spoken of as one of the many who find it easier to pledge themselves to eternity than to what is immediate. To-night he and Emilia hasten onwards to Brookfield, and "To-morrow morning" is all he can say at their parting.

Merthyr Powys is Meredith's favourite Welshman; in praise of his character nothing further needs to be said. His solicitude for Emilia is portrayed in some of the loveliest incidents of the book. He is, he says, never at a loss in his reading of Cymric and Italian natures, and Emilia, he boasts to his sister Georgiana, on her mother's side is Welsh. Emilia says to Georgiana, whose standard of behaviour she often fails to satisfy, "Merthyr *waits* for me," adding in reply to Georgiana's question as to why she did not earlier break her promise to Wilfrid, "I could not see through it till now." And in this statement Merthyr's bearing

throughout *Sandra Belloni* and *Vittoria* is epitomised. In his long task of wooing Emilia back to life and self-confidence, after she is recovered from starvation and despair, his tenderness is unfailing. He plans her dresses, takes her to balls, flatters her, even, to awake her pride. Services of this kind, however, are but the mere surface expression of his feeling. His true service and inestimable gift to Emilia is his understanding of the range and possibilities of her nature, and his refusal to respond to anything but her best. She has been told by Georgiana that Merthyr loves her intensely; she is agitated at the prospect of an interview with Wilfrid—the first since she was ill—and she craves a word of sustainment from Merthyr. He is her tutor, and Wilfrid's knock is heard just as their lessons are at an end. Emilia moves to the door and makes an effort to go, but fear overcomes her; she turns back to Merthyr and kneels at his feet murmuring, "Say something to me." Merthyr takes her hand and lets his eyes dwell upon hers. "The marvel of their not wavering or softening meaningly kept her speechless. She rose with a strength not her own; not comforted, and no longer speculating. It was as if she had been eyeing a golden door shut fast, that might some day open, but was in itself precious to behold."

In Tracy Runningbrook Meredith allows himself a luxury, albeit a luxury that is delightful to his readers. Having created Emilia, he wishes to free himself of the limitations of prose, and convey the impression she makes on the sensitiveness of a poet. Merthyr invites Tracy to stay with them at Monmouth, and be Emilia's companion when she is recovering from an illness caused by the shock of Wilfrid's desertion. From Monmouth Tracy writes letters about her. "As to ill-health," he replies to Wilfrid's inquiries, "Great Mother Nature

has given a house of iron to this soul of fire. The windows may blaze, or the windows may be extinguished, but the house stands firm. When you are lightning or earthquake you may have something to reproach yourself for; as it is, be under no alarm." And Tracy's intense sympathy for Emilia is the medium through which we are shown that noteworthy scene in the woods on a night of frost in May, when Emilia proves that she has regained her voice.

Lucy Feverel has been described as an early Victorian heroine. The description is inadequate, but the measure of its truth may be perceived in studying her successor. In Emilia, Meredith has given us his greatest of soul. Close to Nature, elemental—a force rather than a character—to give a picture of Emilia in any way complete would be to rewrite her story; she can only be revealed in her effect upon others. In touch with poetry and passion at their source, she will only make them consciously her own and realise their interplay upon life, when she has seen herself in isolation from them. Her difficulties are the opposite of Wilfrid's, by whom the loyalty and oneness of feeling which are hers by nature are to be acquired only through much pain and sacrifice; power of soul, and the capacity to concentrate the whole of her physical and mental vigour upon a single emotion; are Emilia's from the first. She has the first essential of artistic achievement, whole-heartedness. She knows nothing of dallying rivulets or sheltered harbours; she sails in mid-stream in the hour of stress as well as in the hour of triumph. Her force is expansive, but has she the power of vision to control it? When the story opens, the task has not been attempted. In her interview with Mr. Pole in his office we are introduced to what Meredith terms Emilia's "first conflict with her simplicity, out of which it is not

to issue clear, as in foregone days"; she must attempt to see the character of him she is speaking to, envisage his standpoint as a means to an end, and her consciousness of the necessity marks "a quality going and a quality coming," the loss and the gain both being a law of her growth. And her author comments on a transition, even more marked, at the point when, forsaken by her lover, she is in terror of losing her voice. She stands before the mirror studying her dress and her face, questioning their attractiveness and wondering how it may be enhanced. "The one Emilia, so unquestioning, so sure, lay dead; and a dozen new spirits, with but a dim likeness to her, were fighting for possession of her frame, now occupying it alone, now in couples; and each casting grim reflections on the other. Which is only a way of telling you that the great result of mortal suffering—consciousness—had fully set in; to ripen; perhaps to debase; at any rate, to prove her." Meredith's philosophy possibly allows too little for the virtue of natures who, "where no misgiving is," rely upon their unanalysed instincts. However that may be, the women to whom his admiration is given, one and all, win to their spiritual independence and rectitude through consciousness of the conditions which in a man-made civilisation their womanhood involves. Emilia, humiliated, craves to see herself of worth in her friend's eyes. The question, as Meredith sees it, is—will she employ her merely feminine and mercantile advantages, trade on her appearance, or will she determine to be valuable in her own eyes, model herself from within outwards? It is answered in Tracy Runningbrook's letters to Wilfrid after her illness, in which Emilia is described as perceiving herself, and even her power of love, as materials to be moulded to beauty, instruments to be tuned and harmonised. And

this, with the controlling and garnering of emotion implied in it, is the keynote of Emilia's development, sustained till the close of *Vittoria*, where Meredith can say of his heroine, "Rarely has a soul been so subjected by its own force. She certainly had the image of God in her mind."

As has already been said, the main outlines of Emilia's character will not lend themselves to description. But minor qualities with which Meredith endows her enable us to learn much of his views. It is, he says, characteristic of the Fine Shades, the Nice Feelings, to ignore the importance of money; consideration of it seems to them to savour of inferior circles from which they have emerged. Emilia, on the contrary, thinks its value real. On the arrival of her harp she exclaims to the sisters, "I can't guess what it cost," and, showing it to Wilfrid, "See what Mr. Pericles thinks I am worth!" And this attitude is not a mere result of her poverty; she maintains it to the end of the book. She writes in her letter to Merthyr, when she is starting for Milan, that payment has bound her to Pericles for three years to come. "I would," she writes, "break what you call a Sentiment. I broke my word to Wilfrid. But this money has a meaning that I cannot conquer! You would not wish me to." And if the petty actions of the story too much hinge on questions of money, the subject is more than redeemed by this final transaction of Emilia's, coupled as it is with her new understanding that her love is to be judged by her acts. On her coming to Brookfield we are told she "maintained a simple discretion." Wilfrid may hear all he cares to hear of her life, but she is by no means willing to volunteer information to his sisters. And this quality is estimated highly by her author, who substitutes it in her character for conventional



rules or pretences. The Italian patriot Marini says of Emilia: "She is half man. She is not what man has made of her sex," and Meredith emphasises the point. She is not, for instance, at all overcome by Pericles' proposals or information as to his relations with women. In one sense she is quite at his mercy; yet, when he attempts familiarity in action, her reply is fiery enough to compel his artistic appreciation. And in that most remarkable scene between Mr. Pole and Emilia, with its masterly study of nervous collapse, her childishness and power, her bluntness and delicacy, find fullest expression. She goes up to town to Mr. Pole's office to plead for herself and for Wilfrid. Mr. Pole supposes she has come on his daughter's behalf to induce him to consult with a doctor. The result is that the tragedy of the situation is heightened by one of those humorous confusions Meredith delights in. Emilia differs so widely from woman as Mr. Pole knows her that he finds her incalculable, and is alternately beguiled and enraged by her words. Her passion is intense, and she thinks in images to which his physical sensitiveness cannot be deaf—prospect of division from Wilfrid goes, she says, like frost through her bones; her heart jerks as if it had to pull her body from the grave each time that it beats; if he slaughters her love and his son's, what chance has he of rest, what pity, what mercy, shall his sufferings anywhere find. The boon Emilia demands, it is out of Mr. Pole's power to grant; but so great is her influence he is compelled to confess to her the secret he guards as his life. And, finally, in the meeting with Wilfrid at Wilming Weir, Emilia's spiritual destiny, her place in the innermost of feeling, is revealed. Ranking with the lyric loves of Richard and Lucy, rapturous as those earliest hours, "By Wilming Weir" is penetrated with a further, a still more delicate beauty. Emilia and



Wilfrid are older in experience than Richard and Lucy, and, though Emilia is immature and uncomplex, this, with her as with Carinthia, is due rather to the slow development of a great nature than to dainty innocence or ordinary simplicity; for she has known hardship and hunger and come into contact with evil. The influence which possesses her, as she watches from the darkening meadow the moon-rays widening on the churning waters of the fall, is as poignant with foreboding as with ecstasy. "The fair Immortal" shone on Richard and Lucy "young as when she looked upon the lovers in Paradise"; now her tide is at the flood, red-gold with the power and passion of centuries. Sound and movement encompass Emilia, till her art once more dominates and possesses her soul. Later, when she has agreed to abandon Italy and her profession, for Wilfrid, she says to him, "Do you know when we were silent just now, I was thinking that water was the history of the world flowing out before me, all mixed up of kings and queens, and warriors with armour, and shouting armies; battles and numbers of mixed people; and great red sunsets, with women kneeling under them? Do you know those long, low sunsets? I love them. They look like blood spilt for love." And throughout the scene her personal passion is in touch with something wider and more universal than itself. Wilfrid, who is at the threshold only of love, is engaged in questioning whether his courage can compass the ordinary human endeavour and claim for his wife the girl whom he recognises as coming nearer super-human nature than anything he knows. Emilia, on the other hand, already has sight of a more commanding ideal. She is to write a year later when she is leaving England for Milan, "May no dear woman I know ever marry the man she first loves." The atmo-

sphere of this scene at Wilming Weir has much in common with the forty-seventh poem of *Modern Love*, with which its imagery presents an interesting parallel.

In discussing his insistence on philosophical and ethical meanings in *Sandra Belloni*, Meredith suggests a distinction in method between that book and its sequel *Vittoria*. Let us, he pleads, be true to time and place. "Here in our fat England, the gardener Time is playing all sorts of delicate freaks in the hues and tracteries of the flower of life, and shall we not note them? If we are to understand our species, and mark the progress of civilisation at all, we must." But when Emilia is in Italy, the Philosopher promises to retire altogether,—“for there is a field of action, of battles and conspiracies, nerve and muscle, where life fights for plain issues, and he can but sum results.” If we accept *Sandra Belloni* and *Vittoria* as our examples, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the field of complex, and not that of “plain,” issues, is the field of Meredith’s genius. He seems not to possess the power of exclusion and selection required for a novel of incident; life, as he reads it, appears too involved and discursive for events to preserve their necessary sequence. As a tale the book is ill-constructed, or rather it is not constructed at all. It contains passages of narrative and description which Meredith has never surpassed, but it is not a story. It is a poet’s account of a great movement of which, though a poet, he has the detailed and intimate knowledge of an historian, love for Italy and democratic sympathies having, in his case, been stimulated by special experience. *Vittoria* made its appearance in the *Fortnightly Review* for 1866, and it has already been mentioned that at that time Meredith was acting as war-correspondent in Venice. The first chapter introduces us to Vittoria

in conclave with half a dozen leaders of the movement for Italian Independence, and their Chief. She is conceived as a devoted patriot destined by Mazzini to give the signal for the rising in Milan. Yet she immediately bewilders us by inconsequent actions. Is it, we ask ourselves, credible that the Vittoria whom we saw half an hour ago dedicating her life to her country, should be scattering letters and messages betraying the plan of the Rising? Vittoria, too, is Emilia matured, and these actions have nothing in common with what we know of Emilia. She, it has been admitted, could be unmindful of others in concentration on her central emotion; Lady Charlotte's feelings, for instance, hardly existed for her in relation to Wilfrid. But this fault is at the opposite pole from the fault in Vittoria. What other matters she may or may not recall in the days intervening between the scene on the mountain and the 15th in Milan, we would not venture to say; that she can be thrown out of her course in respect to the crowning event is incredible.

The life of *Vittoria* is not in its story, but in its most noble dramatisation of certain personages and events. Foremost among these are the descriptions of Mazzini, which, reprinted in *The Secularist* and elsewhere, under the title of "Portrait of Mazzini" and "Mazzini and Italy," remain unrivalled. "He was," writes Meredith, "a man of middle stature, thin, and even frail; with the complexion of the student, and the student's aspect. The attentive droop of his shoulders and head, the straining of his buttoned coat across his chest, the air as of one who waited and listened, which distinguished his figure, detracted from the promise of other than contemplative energy, until his eyes were fairly seen and felt. That is, until the observer became aware that those soft and large, dark meditative eyes had taken hold of him. In

them lay no abstracted student's languor, no reflex burning of a solitary lamp ; but a quiet, grappling force engaged the penetrating look. Gazing upon them, you were drawn in suddenly among the thousand whirring wheels of a capacious and vigorous mind, that was both reasoning and prompt, keen of intellect, acting throughout all its machinery, and having all under full command : an orbed mind, supplying its own philosophy, and arriving at the sword-stroke by logical steps,—a mind much less supple than a soldier's ; anything but the mind of a Hamlet. . . . He saw far, and he grasped ends beyond obstacles ; he was nourished by sovereign principles ; he despised material present interests ; and, as I have said, he was less supple than a soldier. If the title of idealist belonged to him, we will not immediately decide that it was opprobrious. The idealised conception of stern truths played about his head certainly for those who knew and who loved it. Such a man, perceiving a devout end to be reached, might prove less scrupulous in his course, possibly, and less remorseful, than revolutionary Generals. His smile was quite unclouded, and came softly as a curve in water. It seemed to flow with, and to pass in and out of, his thoughts,—to be a part of his emotion and his meaning when it shone transiently full. For as he had an orbed mind, so he had an orbed nature. The passions were absolutely in harmony with the intelligence." And this great portrait, surpassing in fidelity the work of professed historians of the movement, is equalled in insight by the closing lines of the Opera which Meredith puts into the mouth of his heroine in the great scene at La Scala. Vittoria has taken Milan by storm ; throughout this last act her power has been culminating ; the opera house is hushed as for a veritable death scene, while she gives voice

to the lines which embody the creed of Young Italy's Chief:—

Our life is but a little holding, lent  
To do a mighty labour : we are one  
With heaven and the stars when it is spent  
To serve God's aim : else die we with the sun.

Allusion has already been made to the fact that *Vittoria* abounds in descriptions of natural scenery that are among the most beautiful in Meredith's writing. The energy and movement of the duel in the Stelvio Pass command universal admiration. And Vittoria in the mountains with Merthyr, bringing the whole force of her character to hold herself poised between the past and the future, may hardly be spoken of in words other than Meredith's own. Here, at the close of the book, the conflicting elements no longer remain. We are face to face with the commanding ideal, the great destiny, foreshadowed in *Sandra Belloni*; and in it everything else is absorbed. Separation between Vittoria's love for her husband and her love for her country has now become impossible. Circumstances provided these conditions for the novelist, but he, it should be remembered, provided the woman to match them. He set out in Emilia to balance and combine an idealist and an artist, and make both perfect in a woman; he has merely availed himself of circumstances the most likely to unite and inflame them. Vittoria in pursuing an ideal has not had to turn her back on her art or her personal relations. The ideal embraced and demanded them both; it gathered together and made daily demands on all parts of her being. It was high, but it was not remote. And response to these daily demands has met with its highest reward. She has learned the meaning of those words of Mazzini she sang as *Camilla*, "There is an end to joy; there is no end to striving." She has contracted the habit of surrender; she cannot



be robbed. Merthyr and she are in the mountains seeking her husband, and they are likelier to find him dead than alive:—"Vittoria read the faces of the mornings as human creatures have tried to gather the sum of their destinies off changing surfaces,—fair not meaning fair, nor black black, but either the mask upon the secret of God's terrible will; and to learn it and submit, was the spiritual burden of her motherhood, that the child leaping with her heart might live. Not to hope blindly, in the exceeding anxiousness of her passionate love, nor blindly to fear; not to let her soul fly out among the twisting chances; not to sap her great maternal duty by affecting false stoical serenity,—to nurse her soul's strength, and suckle her womanly weakness with the tears which are poison when repressed; to be at peace with a disastrous world for the sake of the dependent life unborn; by such pure efforts she clung to God. Soft dreams of sacred nuptial tenderness, tragic images, wild pity, were like phantoms encircling her, plucking at her as she went; but they were beneath her feet, and she kept them from lodging between her breasts. The thought that her husband, though he should have perished, was not a life lost if their child lived, sustained her powerfully. It seemed to whisper at times almost, as it were Carlo's ghost breathing in her ears: 'On thee!' On her the further duty devolved; and she trod down hope, lest it should build her up and bring a shock to surprise her fortitude: she put back alarm. The mountains and the valleys scarce had names for her understanding; they were but a scene where the will of her Maker was at work. Rarely has a soul been so subjected by its own force. She certainly had the image of God in her mind." "Not to let her soul fly out among the twisting chances," to Meredith that achievement is the end and



aim of man's discipline. Not to lose the capacities for desire and aspiration, but to control and subdue them to the plot of earth that is ours, instead of being dragged in their wake—such is his reading of the lesson of life, though it involves to him as to Vittoria, a dis-burdening of Hope as well as of Fear.

## CHAPTER VIII

### RHODA FLEMING

*RHODA FLEMING*, published in 1865, is a "plain" tale, concerned primarily with persons in humble life. From his choice and treatment of the subject one might imagine that Meredith had determined to confute the readiest generalisation of his critics, a generalisation that has indeed been suggested in the preceding chapter. At any rate he has proved here, past all dispute, his mastery over the simpler chords of human emotion, his power to reveal tragic heights in an everyday story without any loosening of hold upon reality. Mr. Le Gallienne alludes to *Rhoda Fleming* as written in "Saxon simple as song," and certainly such chapters as "Dahlia's Frenzy," and "When the Night is Darkest," for directness and intensity of feeling and expression would be by no means easy so rival. Rhoda and Dahlia Fleming are the daughters of a Kentish working farmer, and the opening of the book is devoted to a description of their mother's skill in gardening, and their early days on the farm. Reduced to its framework, the story, after this, is an account of Dahlia's visit to London, her seduction and desertion there by the nephew of the squire of her village, and Rhoda's consequent suffering. A good deal of course is told of Edward Blancove—Dahlia's lover—and almost as much of his cousin Algernon, and of their friends. Algernon Blancove, a typical idiot of his class, is indeed wearisome, and it is difficult not to wish

that we had heard less of his exploits. But these persons of superior social position have no rivalry with Dahlia and Rhoda; the interest is centred in the sisters and in their experiences throughout.

Though Rhoda Fleming gives its title to the book, it is her sister's tragedy that is the supreme event. Our first insight into Dahlia's character is gained from her letters. The first is to Edward Blancove, when, unexpectedly finding Rhoda at her lodgings, she has dismissed her lover without explanation from the window. The letter is delivered to Edward next morning at his Inn Chambers by a porter who says that two young ladies have left it. The writer's abandonment to passion acquires its significance from what it reveals of the intensity of her normal relationship to Rhoda. We do not question her outcries—she has wept through the whole of the night, she moves like a ghost, her life is unreal till she hears of Edward's forgiveness—but it is the simple background of fact she recounts that make these what they are: "In my bed there lay my sister, and I could not leave her, *I love her so*. I could not have got downstairs after seeing her there; I had to say that cold word and shut the window." The second letter is written some months later to Rhoda, who has returned to the farm. Dahlia says she is leaving England that day, and continues, "I must not love you too much, for I have all my love to give to my Edward, my own now, and I am his trustingly for ever. But he will let me give you some of it—and Rhoda is never jealous. She shall have a great deal. Only I am frightened when I think how *immense* my love is for him; so that anything—everything he thinks right is right to me. I am not afraid to think so. . . . I am like drowned to everybody but one. We are looking on the sea. In half an hour I shall have forgotten the tread of English earth. I do not know

that I breathe. All I know is a fear that I am flying, and my strength will not continue. That is when I am not touching his hand. There is France opposite. I shut my eyes and see the whole country but it is like what I feel for Edward—all in dark moonlight. Oh! I trust him so! I bleed for him. I could *make* all my veins bleed out at a sad thought about him. And from France to Switzerland and Italy. The sea sparkles just as if it said 'Come to the sun': and I am going. . . . Here is Edward. He says I *may* send his *love* to you. Address:—Mrs. Edward Ayrton, Poste Restante, Lausanne, Switzerland. P.S.—Lausanne is where—but another time, and I will always tell you the history of the places to instruct you, poor heart in dull England. Adieu! Good-bye, and God bless my innocent at home, my dear sister. I love her. I never can forget her. The day is so lovely. It seems on purpose for us. Be sure you write on thin paper to Lausanne. It is on a blue lake: you see snow mountains, and now there is a bell ringing—kisses from me! we start. I must sign.—Dahlia." In spite of her lover's disloyalty and Mrs. Lovell's machinations, it is impossible to think of the writer of these letters as being argued, or arguing herself, into the thought of marriage with anyone but Edward. But one of the most masterly traits of the book is the use to which Meredith puts his understanding of illness in Dahlia's history. What physical energy remains to her after her fever spends itself in the mere remembrance and revival of feeling; she has no surplus of strength to formulate arguments or to refute them. At moments she flames with her passion; but normally she is frozen and incapable in her sister's hands. Rhoda has always been the stronger in character; now she determines what position is to be taken and takes it for Dahlia.

Noble and convincing as Rhoda's character undoubtedly is, is it not difficult to accept the whole of her action in compelling Dahlia's marriage with Sedgett? It is hardly possible not to feel that her love for Dahlia would have revealed the situation in its true and not its conventional aspect, given her at least the degree of misgiving Robert experiences. Her conviction that Dahlia at all costs must be "saved" is indeed at one with her father's. But the view in his case is convincing mainly because it is masculine. Our credulity too is strained by the choice of a double-dyed villain for the bridegroom, even though his courtship is kept adroitly out of sight, and we are not called on to see him with Dahlia. He stands to the Flemings, as he was of course intended to stand, for a principle; nevertheless, we must include in our estimate of Mrs. Lovell's character her knowledge of Sedgett, and, in judging Edward, we have to remember that he had a suspicion at least of the identity of the man into whose hands he was willing that Dahlia should fall.

It is usual to remark that Meredith's novels owe a good deal to Richardson's. But the suggestion is not commonly explained or expanded, and, though Sir Charles Grandison is recalled by name in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, it is not in a very serious connection. The immense differences between Richardson's novels and Meredith's need not be dwelt on, nor need we add that any likeness suggested must be qualified by seeing them in relation to their periods. It is said that Richardson came to recognise variety of mind among women from his early experiences of the divergent desires of those who employed him to write their letters. However this may be, his women are more worked from within outwards, than those of any other writer of his time. Richardson had the temerity to question the



prevailing conception of the sex, and at least to attempt an answer to Mowbray's astonished outcry over Lovelace's grief for Clarissa: "She was but a woman, and what was there in one woman more than another?" It was, in fact, only because Richardson's feeling for Clarissa had exalted her to such an exceptional position that his readers were induced to look on Lovelace's offer of reparation as anything but quixotic. And *Clarissa* in spite of its sermonising has much in common with *Rhoda Fleming*. Lovelace's anguish when he realises that Clarissa's soul has escaped his grasp, that it is "out of his power any way in the world to be even with her," is closely parallel with Edward's. He writes to his friend of Clarissa, who is dying, and refuses to see him or to entertain his offers of marriage: "Has not her triumph over me, from first to last, been infinitely greater than her sufferings from me? Would the sacred regard I have for her purity, even for her *personal* as well as *intellectual* purity, permit, I could prove this as clear as the sun. Hence it is that I admire her more than ever, and that my love for her is less personal, as I may say more *intellectual*, than ever I thought it could be to woman." And Meredith tells us of Edward when, after Dahlia's recovery from attempted suicide, he is urging her to marry him: "He had three interviews with Dahlia; he wrote to her as many times. There was but one answer for him; and when he ceased to charge her with unforgivingness, he came to the strange conclusion that beyond our calling a woman a Saint for rhetorical purposes, and esteeming her as one for pictorial, it is indeed possible, as he had slightly discerned in this woman's presence, both to think her saintly and to have the sentiments inspired by the over-earthly in her presence." A certain makeweight of circumstance—rank, abduction, delicacy of health—

is thrown into the scale with Richardson's heroine ; but this was necessary ballast at a time when women, whatever they may be to-day, were most certainly "shamefully outweighed,"<sup>1</sup> and it scarcely lessens his achievement. Clarissa, disowned and cast out by her family, unmarried, dying, is spiritually triumphant and supreme. In *Rhoda Fleming* the climax is similar, though, in keeping with her circumstances, Dahlia's final feeling for her lover is more delicate than Clarissa's. She does not proffer Christian charity and prayers for Edward's amendment ; all that she has is his. But her life has been robbed of capacity for love or joy. In Clarissa's case death is the final note ; the tragedy could go no farther. In Dahlia's it would have been inadequate, an evasion of the tragedy. Her story, more delicate, more poignant, asks death in life as its end. "She lived seven years her sister's housemate, nurse of the growing swarm. She had gone through fire, as few women have done in like manner, to leave their hearts among the ashes ; but with that human heart she left regrets behind her. The soul of this young creature filled its place. It shone in her eyes and in her work, a lamp in her little neighbourhood ; and not less a lamp of cheerful beams for one day being as another to her. When she died she relinquished nothing. Others knew the loss."

Farmer Fleming, the impassive countryman, apparently incapable of passion and not responsive to any ordinary stimulus, is in one sense the greatest character in the book. In his wife's lifetime he was indeed shown capable of that small degree of feeling required to nurse a grievance. He thought of her as extravagant (for which he may be pardoned, since she was so), and bitterly resented her suggestion that he should give up the farm, on which he was losing, and join her in con-

<sup>1</sup> *The Sage Enamoured.*

verting her flourishing flower-garden (she requisitioned manure from the farmyard) into a commercial undertaking. But his dumbness was such that, except in regard to this unimportant practical change, she managed him to the end, and died unaware of his resentment. Yet from the moment Dahlia's letter arrives announcing her marriage, but giving no surname, he is roused and implacable. We see him only in occasional and isolated acts, but we feel the weight of the force that operates in him. Instincts and traditions of generations are finding a voice. The "respectability" Dahlia has forfeited, and which is miraculously offered to her again, is to him a thing as little to be questioned as the forces of nature. He epitomises the awfulness of stupidity, blind impulse not amenable to reason. But he is a figure none the less heroic because pitiless and cruel—a figure representing much more than itself, and the very keynote of the tragedy. For Meredith's insight makes clear to us here, as in *One of our Conquerors*, that the force Dahlia and Nataly oppose has accumulated through ages, and though it appears to find its earliest expression in their criticism by others, has its final stronghold in the instincts of the rebels themselves. Thus the colossal proportions of the power with which the individual is at war demand for their artistic embodiment something approaching an heroic background, and in contemporary life this is most easily obtainable in a drama set amid primitive people. The same forces operate in higher grades of society, but there they are so differentiated and divided against themselves that they produce their impression only fragmentarily and in separated voices. And here, perhaps, is the reason why *One of our Conquerors*, in spite of its far profounder and more delicate poignancy, is less overpowering in tragic effect.

## CHAPTER IX

### MEREDITH AS REVIEWER AND CRITIC

THE *Essay on Comedy*, while it assures Meredith's position in the front rank of literary critics, has tended inevitably to dwarf the importance of his other critical work. His articles in the *Fortnightly Review* for 1868 have been alluded to already, and it may be valuable to consider these in some detail ; for they are eminently characteristic of his sympathetic and painstaking attitude towards comparatively unknown authors among his contemporaries.

In the January number of the *Review* he warmly hails Myers' *Saint Paul* as a noble poem, worthy of its theme and strikingly in contrast with the common run of religious verse ; he examines the foundations of its success, and pays a high tribute to its workmanship. In February he reviews the *Countess of Brownlowe's Reminiscences from 1802 to 1815*, a book which in one sense is not literature and contributes nothing to history, but is full of vivid human impressions of personages and events, and therefore, it need hardly be said, valuable in Meredith's eyes. Its chief interest for us is that it affords its reviewer an opportunity to reply to some of the author's strictures on Frenchwomen and their manners. It appears that the Countess of Brownlowe was in Paris with Lady Castlereagh when that lady received a ceremonial visit from the Duchesse de Courlande and her daughter, Madame de Perigor ,

afterwards Duchesse de Dino and Talleyrand's right hand in London. The Countess describes Madame de Perigord as highly rouged and dressed in a pink gown, with roses on her head, and this in spite of the fact that she is, so Lady Castlereagh is informed by the mother, in grief for the loss of her child; all of which makes clear to the Englishwomen that these ladies are no better than they should be, and causes them to moralise on the curious company those who move in diplomatic circles are sometimes obliged to keep. Meredith comments: "Madame de Perigord was simply fulfilling what she conceived to be a public duty. She had to pay a visit, and she did not choose—for it is not the habit of the country—to affect the eyes of others by presenting herself sombrely clad. Frenchwomen are, to say the least, as tender-hearted mothers as Englishwomen. She may have been *bien triste* for the loss of the child in spite of her rouge; nay, coming of a provident race, she may even on that occasion have thought it advisable to lay on an extra dab of her artificial bloom, not supposing that she violated any laws of decency, but supposing quite the reverse. Why should she wear a suffering heart on her sleeve? Frenchwomen hold our obtrusion of heavy mourning into society to be an offence, a selfish insistence on private grief, evincing absolute want of consideration for others; in short, a piece of our national bad breeding." Although this is not literary criticism, it seemed pardonable in view of Meredith's well-known admiration for France and French literature, to note in passing a championship so characteristic of its author. In May, he reviews *Merivale's Translation of the Iliad into English Rhymed Verse*, and estimates it highly. It is, he says, "a rendering capable of declamation, as every true version of Homer must be." In June, he



provides, in the form of a fifteen-page review of *Robert Lytton's Poems*, what is practically an essay on verse-writing. Lytton, he remarks, occupies a position far enough removed from the eminence of Tennyson and Browning on the one hand, and the fledgling author on the other, to be a fit subject for criticism and advice ; and it should be the reviewer's object to discover and reveal to the public the nature of any promise of great and good work in writers who have achieved this mid-way position. He protests against summary methods which too often dispose of young writers' work on mere grounds of distaste. "We have not," he exclaims, "so many men of genius or of cleverness who are anxious to build up a name in letters that it is necessary to turn an amazed frown on them when they produce an ambitious book not quite after the prevailing fashion ; nor is our modern literature so rich in good things that we can afford to leave its growth to the fatness of the soil, and cherish only what delights a dilettante appetite. Goethe held, even in Germany, that art should be cultivated. The defenders of such literary gateways as we possess resemble too often the old Austrian out-station gendarmes, who frequently used to examine a passport by reading it upside down, and then declare it imperfect and unsatisfactory." Nevertheless Meredith frankly bewails the number and speed of Lytton's verse publications. All hasty publication he regards as an evil, but an evil in which there are recognisable degrees. 'Prose,' he writes, "is always ready to satiate the appetite for labour : prose travels to limbo without a shriek. The road is wide for it in that direction. Prose strengthens the hand. It does not of necessity call up fictitious sentiments to inflate a conception run to languor. I allude especially to the habit of producing numberless minor poems of purely



sentimental subjects. A large and noble theme has a framework that yields as much support as it demands. Lyrics yield none ; and when they are not spontaneous they rob us of a great deal of our strength and sincerity. If they are true things, coming of a man's soul, they are so much taken from him ; if the reverse, they hurry him. There should not be such a thing as the habit of lyrical composition. This effusion of song is not natural to us. The greatest of lyrists have the power but rarely, and if they published songs and odes and snatches only, their works would be remarkably contracted. In a stimulating season, when prompted by the passions of youth or of a generous sympathy, they give abundance, but that abundance does not make volumes—at least, not publishable volumes. A great lyricist (and we have one among us), inflamed by the woes of an unhappy people throbbing for fullness of life and freedom, sings perforce ; but he has a great subject, and we do not see that it is his will which distinctly predominates in his verses. Shelley's lyrical pieces are few, considering the vigour of his gift of song ; and so are those of Burns and of Campbell and Hood. Heinrich Heine added a new element to his songs and ballads : an irritant exile breathed irony into them and shaped them into general form and significance. He is the unique example of a man who made himself his constant theme, and he pursued it up to the time he was rescued from his 'mattress grave.' By virtue of a cunning art he caused it to be interesting while he lived. I feel the monotony of it begin to grow on me often now when I take up the *Buch der Lieder*, the *Neuer Frühling*, and the *Romanzero*. Goethe's songs were the fruits of a long life. He tells us how they sprang up in him, and I do not doubt of his singing as the birds sing ; but without irreverence it may

be said that in many cases this was merely a self-indulgent mood to which German verse allured the highest of German poets. I love the larger number of them for his sake, not for their own. The Tuscan Giusti, one of the finest of modern lyrists, published very little. Alfred de Musset's songs, all of them exquisite, might be comprised in half a dozen pages of this review. In fact, it is from observation or meditation that poetry gets sinew and substance, and the practice of observing or meditating soon tames in poets the disposition to pour out verses profusely."

As it obviously is impossible to quote more than a paragraph here and there from Meredith's critical writings, it has appeared most to the purpose to select such as bear recognisably on his own practice, or on theories he has formulated elsewhere. In April, 1880, he wrote to James Thomson: "My friends could tell you that I am a critic hard to please. They say that irony lurks in my eulogy." And he has lately said<sup>1</sup> that he thinks reviewers, even those of *The Times Literary Supplement*, are becoming slightly too urbane, and has observed regretfully "Almost all men imagine they can write a novel." Yet Meredith's intense interest in the work of young writers and journalists is a constant subject of remark with his friends, and wherever and whenever he discovers force and reality his praise is unstinted. Proof of a fact so generally acknowledged is unnecessary, but, if it were needed, attention might be drawn to his review of *Mrs. Meynell's Essays*,<sup>2</sup> and the remainder of the letter to James Thomson. "I am not," he continues, "frequently satisfied by verse. But I have gone through your volume, and partly a second time, and I have not found

<sup>1</sup> *Daily Chronicle*, July 5th, 1904.

<sup>2</sup> *The National Review*, August, 1896.

the line I would propose to recast. I have many pages that no other English poet could have written. Nowhere is the verse feeble, nowhere is the expression insufficient; the majesty of the line has always its full colouring and marches under a banner. And you accomplish this effect with the utmost sobriety, with absolute self-mastery. I have not time at present to speak of the *City of Melancholia*. There is a massive impressiveness in it that goes beyond Durer, and takes it into the upper regions where poetry is the sublimation of the mind of man, the voice of our highest."

But enlightening as a summary of Meredith's reviews and critical writings undoubtedly would be, standing alone it must fail to reveal the heart of the matter; for the most delightful and penetrating of his criticism is scattered incidentally in the pages of his novels. This, it need hardly be said, is modified to some extent by the characters who voice it, but it carries always an undercurrent at least of its writer's opinion. His first contains that noteworthy passage in which Lady Blandish gives Sir Austin her impressions of the authors he has asked her to study. "I cannot," she says, "get on with Gibbon. I dislike the *sneering essence* of his writings. I keep referring to his face, until the dislike seems to become personal. How different is it with Wordsworth! And yet I cannot escape from the thought that he is always solemnly thinking of himself (but I *do* reverence him). But this is curious; Byron was a greater egotist, and yet I do not feel the same with him. He reminds me of a beast of the desert, savage and beautiful; and the former is what one would imagine a superior donkey reclaimed from the heathen to be, a *very* superior donkey, I mean, with great power of speech and great natural complacency, and whose stubbornness you must

admire as part of his mission. The worst is that no one will imagine anything sublime in a superior donkey, so my simile is unfair and false."<sup>1</sup> To the last sentence we may add as a footnote that most naïve and delightful of Meredith's self-criticisms: "This simile says more than I mean it to say, but those who understand similes will know what is due to them."<sup>2</sup> We quoted earlier Meredith's famous championship of metaphor in relation to the character of Dudley Sowerby.<sup>3</sup> His distinctions between one kind of metaphor and another are most illuminating. In *Diana of the Crossways* Lady Dunstane is made to object to the auctioneer's advertisement of her ancestral home as phrased in "the plush of speech"; and insists on its withdrawal. In describing the situation of the house, Meredith has himself just spoken of the smoke above London in the distance as "the ever-flying banner of the metropolis." "Withdraw we likewise," says Meredith, "'banner of the metropolis.' That 'plush of speech' haunts all efforts to swell and illuminate citizen prose to a princely poetic."<sup>4</sup> Alvan in the *Tragic Comedians* speaks of the Jews as a "parable people," a race that has no dislike of metaphor: "Provided always that the metaphor be not like the metaphysician's treatise on nature: a torch to see the sunrise!"<sup>5</sup>

*Diana of the Crossways* contains an exhaustive exposition of Meredith's theories of his art: the opening chapter on "Diaries and Diarists" is mainly a defence of them. "Be wary of the dis-relish of brain-stuff. You must feed on something. Matter that is not nourishing

<sup>1</sup> *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, chapter XXIII.

<sup>2</sup> *Sandra Belloni*, chapter XVIII.

<sup>3</sup> *One of Our Conquerors*, chapter XXVI.

<sup>4</sup> *Diana of the Crossways*, chapter I.

<sup>5</sup> *The Tragic Comedians*, chapter IV.

to brains can help to constitute nothing but the bodies that are pitched on rubbish heaps. Brain-stuff is not lean stuff; the brain-stuff of fiction is internal history, and to suppose it dull is the profoundest of errors."<sup>1</sup> Diana, the novelist, in attempting to describe Percy Dacier to Emma, says, "I may tell you his eyes are pale-blue, his features regular, his hair silky, brownish, his legs long, his head rather stooping (only the head), his mouth commonly closed: these are the facts, and you have seen much the same in a nursery doll. Such literary craft is of the nursery. So with landscapes. The art of the pen (we write on darkness) is to rouse the inward vision, instead of labouring with a Drop-scene brush, as if it were to the eye; because our flying minds cannot contain a protracted description. That is why the poets, who spring imagination with a word or phrase, paint lasting pictures. The Shakespearian, the Dantesque, are in a line, two at most."<sup>2</sup> But in the *Tragic Comedians* a claim is made for fiction, shorter, but even more powerful, than anything to be found in *Diana*. Alvan asks Clotilde what she has been reading: "Oh, light literature—poor stuff," is her reply. "When we two read together," he says, "you will not say that. Light literature is the garden and the orchard, the fountain, the rainbow, the far view; the view within us as well as without. Our blood runs through it, our history in the quick. The Philistine detests it, because he has no view, out or in. The dry confess they are cut off from the living tree, peeled and sapless, when they condemn it. The vulgar demand to have their pleasures in their own likeness—and let them swamp their troughs! they shall not degrade the fame of noble fiction. We are the choice public, which will

<sup>1</sup> *Diana of the Crossways*, chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter xv.



have good writing for light reading. Poet, novelist, essayist, dramatist, shall be ranked honourably in my Republic. I am neither, but a man of law, a student of the sciences, a politician, on the road to government and statecraft : and yet I say I have learnt as much from light literature as from heavy—as much, that is, from the pictures of our human blood in motion as from the clever assortment of our forefatherly heaps of bones. Shun those who cry out against fiction and have no taste for elegant writing. For to have no sympathy with the playful mind is not to have a mind : it is a test.”<sup>1</sup> To Alvan, the reformer, poetry, though he aspires to take it seriously, is as light as any other kind of literature. The closing sentence of the letter to James Thomson quoted above, and our chapters on the poems, will suggest that Meredith himself took a different view of it. But there is a passage in *Sandra Belloni* in which, through the mouth of his heroine, he makes a criticism of one of the lighter aspects of the *Ars Poetica*. “You do not care for verse,” says Sir Purcell to Emilia. “Poetry?” she replies; “no, not much. It seems like talking on tiptoe; like animals in cages; always going to one end and back again. . . .” “And making the same noise when they get at the end—like the bears.” Sir Purcell slightly laughed. “You don’t approve of the rhymes?” “Yes, I like the rhymes; but when you use words—I mean, if you are in earnest—how can you count and have stops, and—no, I do not care anything for poetry.”<sup>2</sup> Emilia’s problem is certainly far-reaching.

In the *Essay on Comedy* Meredith has proved to the full his power of forming complete and delicate literary estimates. Elsewhere his allusions to the masters of

<sup>1</sup> *The Tragic Comedians*, chapter VI.

<sup>2</sup> *Sandra Belloni*, chapter XXXVIII.

literature are chiefly of the kind that "spring imagination with a word or phrase." Richmond Roy's most excellent fooling with "Great Will"<sup>1</sup> falls in its place in a subsequent chapter. In *The Tragic Comedians* Clotilde introduces herself to Alvan in a discussion on Hamlet. Her view is "mad from the first"; Alvan's "he was born bilious; he partook of the father's constitution, not the mother's. High-thoughted, quick-nerved to follow the thought, reflective, if an interval yawned between his hand and the act, he was by nature two-minded: as full of conscience as a nursing mother that sleeps beside her infant:—she hears the silent beginning of a cry. Before the ghost walked he was an elementary hero; one puff of action would have whiffed away his melancholy. After it he was a dizzy moraliser, waiting for the winds to blow him to his deeds—or out. The apparition of his father to him poisoned a sluggish run of blood, and that venom in the blood distracted a head steeped in Wittenberg philosophy. With metaphysics in one and poison in the other, with the outer world opened on him and this world stirred to confusion, he wore the semblance of madness, he was throughout sane; sick, but never with his reason dethroned."<sup>2</sup> Alvan's talk with Clotilde is of statesmen, of European politics, of literatures ancient and modern. They capped verses of "the incomparable Heinrich—lucid metheglin, with here and there no dubious flavour of acid, and a lively sting in the tail of the honey. Sentiment, cynicism, and satin impropriety and scabrous, are among those verses, where pure poetry has a recognised voice; but the lower elements constitute the popularity in a cultivated society inclining to wantonness out of bravado as well as by taste."<sup>3</sup> The marked

<sup>1</sup> *Harry Richmond*, chapter II.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tragic Comedians*, chapter IV.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter IV.

influence of Carlyle on Meredith's social and political opinion, and still more on his methods of thought, gives a special interest and value to a passage in *Beauchamp's Career*. "His (Beauchamp's) favourite author," we are told, "was one writing of Heroes, in a style resembling either early architecture or utter dilapidation, so loose and rough it seemed ; a wind-in-the-orchard style, that tumbled down here and there an appreciable fruit with uncouth bluster ; sentences without commencements running to abrupt endings and smoke, like waves against a seawall, learned dictionary words giving a hand to street-slang, and accents falling on them haphazard, like slant rays from driving clouds ; all the pages in a breeze, the whole book producing a kind of electrical agitation in the mind and the joints." This, it is true, is Rosamund Culling's impression, and needs as its background the general enthusiasm for Carlyle implicit in Meredith's writings. In *The Essay on Comedy* the justice of some of Carlyle's conclusions touching history and society is indeed questioned, but an immortal tribute is paid to his humour. "Finite and infinite," it is said, "flash from one to the other with him, lending him a two-edged thought that peeps out of his peacefulest lines by fits, like the lantern of the fire-watcher at the windows, going the rounds at night." In regard to their style it is sometimes contended that Meredith and Carlyle drew from common stock in Jean Paul Richter. It is probable, however, that too much stress has been laid on German influences in Meredith's writings ; his boyhood certainly was spent in Germany, but before he was sixteen he had returned to England. At any rate, it is clear, in regard to ideas, that the nucleus of the conception of Earth, the stress laid upon "the stern-exact," the belief in the saving power of work, are shared by Meredith with Carlyle.

Last, but not least, among these quotations one must be included from *Sandra Belloni*, in which we have Meredith's apologia for a feature commonly condemned in his work. Cornelia has objected to Tracy Runningbrook as a novelist on the ground that "he coins words." Mr. Barrett replies. "A writer," he says, "who is not servile and has insight, must coin from his own mint. In poetry we are rich enough; but in prose also we owe everything to the licence our poets have taken in the teeth of critics. Our simplest prose style is nearer to poetry with us, for this reason, that the poets have made it. Read French poetry. With the first couplet the sails are full, and you have left the shores of prose far behind. Mr. Runningbrook coins words and risks expressions because an imaginative Englishman, pen in hand, is the cadet and vagabond of the family—an exploring adventurer—whereas to a Frenchman it all comes inherited like a well-filled purse. The audacity of the French mind, and the French habit of quick social intercourse, have made them nationally far richer in language. Let me add, individually as much poorer. Read their stereotyped descriptions. They all say the same things. They have one big Gallic trumpet. Wonderfully eloquent: we feel that: but the person does not speak. And now, you will be surprised to learn that, notwithstanding what I have said, I should still side with Mr. Runningbrook's fair critic rather than with him. The reason is, that the necessity to write as he does is so great that a strong barrier—a *chevaux-de-frise* of pen-points—must be raised against every newly-minted word and hazardous coiner, or we shall be inundated. So it has been with our greatest, so it must be with the rest of them, or we shall have a Transatlantic literature. By no means desirable, I think. Yet, see: when a piece of Transatlantic slang happens

to be tellingly true—something coined from an absolute experience; from a fight with elements—we cannot resist it: it invades us. In the same way poetic rashness of the right quality enriches the language. I would make it prove its quality.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Sandra Belloni*, chapter VIII.



## CHAPTER X

### THE ADVENTURES OF HARRY RICHMOND

THE reader who falls under the spell of one after another of Meredith's novels finds himself obliged to be on his guard against claiming more than one of them as the greatest. The range of characterisation is so immense, the inequalities within the same book are so marked, that a summary estimate of each, and a comparison of each with all the rest, are singularly difficult to make. If *Harry Richmond* might be divided into two halves, of the first it would be easy to say: "Here is the greatest of Meredith's novels." This portion, which comprises Harry's boyhood with his father and grandfather, his stay at the farm, his journey with Kiomi, and his voyage with Captain Bulstead and travels in Germany, is one of the most remarkable feats in our literature. The first page plunges us into the very heart of the story. That midnight tussle between old Squire Beltham and Roy Richmond for possession of the child is as stirring as anything in our fiction. And it provides the most skilful of backgrounds for the fantasy of Harry's after life. A lesser novelist might have moved the child and his father through a no-man's land that was delightful enough; but the wonder of Meredith's exploit is that their life appears perfectly credible, woven against this most typically British of backgrounds. The alternation between fantasy and sanest prose is maintained throughout. When Shylock's

descendant walks off with Roy Richmond, Harry is conveyed to a homestead smelling of butter and cheese; while Roy is diverting a German principality with his freaks, Harry is at the most realistic of schools; Kiomi's people are camped at the very gate of his typically English home, but Kiomi is "fresh of the East, as the morning when her ancient people struck tents in the track of their shadows." And not the least result of this delicate counterpoise is the reader's sensation that the "cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces," with which the novelist's fancy surrounds him, have their likeness in his own experience; life, fitful and tragic, is before him, though never exhausted or defined.

Yet, no sooner is this tribute paid to the first half of the book than we find ourselves hastening to remark upon the subtle and delicate interests of the last. There Harry, true son of his father, is the fairy prince within sight of his goal; but no more than within sight of it, because he is his father's son. There are persons in life who through their impressional susceptibility, and by a gift of passionate appreciation, may take rank for a time with those who are greatly their superiors; and it is not the smallest of Harry Richmond's distinctions that the Princess Ottilia lives for us through him, and that, in spite of his own variableness, he makes clear to us what would otherwise be inchoate in her. For if Ottilia is not the greatest of Meredith's heroines, it is because his characterisation of her is too elusive, because the atmosphere she breathes in is too rarefied for the reader. Ottilia never formulates or expresses any decision against marriage with Harry; the barrier revealed to us between them, though not less enduring than rank, is much less tangible. Not to be removed or undermined, it might have been surmounted; but a giant such as Alvan would have been needed for the task: it

was ludicrously impossible for a youth whose delicacy and insight had not the ordinary Englishman's endurance to back them up.

"Poetry," Meredith has said, "is the everlastingly and embracingly human; without it your fictions are flat foolishness"; and again, "When we let romance go we change a sky for a ceiling." These sentences might serve as mottoes for *Harry Richmond*, a book by the side of which most of our fictions are flat foolishness indeed. A comparison between *Richard Feverel* and *The Egoist*, much to the advantage of the former, was suggested in an earlier chapter; and surely, if any further proof were needed of the contention that Meredith's genius lies in poetic greatness of design rather than in intellectual analysis, *Harry Richmond* would supply it. As it originally appeared in *The Cornhill* (1870-71), the book was sixty chapters in length; its length has since been reduced slightly, but it is still the longest of the novels. In the space at our disposal an analysis of the story, or even of the characters, is out of the question, the range of incident and characterisation being immense. There is, however, one personage in the book, beside whom all the others sink into comparative obscurity. Roy Richmond is one of the greatest, perhaps the very greatest, of Meredith's creations. He is the tragic comedian, unrivalled in fiction. Excepting the essentials, he possesses all the equipment of a hero. His affections are strong, his feeling in matters of taste is delicate; he is fearless and marvellously energetic and resourceful. But morally he is an outlaw, and uses the weapons of outlawry. To Squire Beltham, whose daughter he married, he stands for all that is outrageous and low. To his son, in childhood, and to the women who love him, he is without equal on earth. Harry is little more than a baby when his father carries him off

from his grandfather's country home to live in "a street where all the house-doors were painted black and shut with a bang"—a street haunted by milkmen "and no cows anywhere; numbers of people, and no acquaintances among them." But "my father," he tells us, "could soon make me forget that I was transplanted; he could act dog, tame rabbit, fox, pony, and a whole nursery collection alive. . . . When he was at home I rode him all round the room and upstairs to bed. I lashed him with a whip till he frightened me, so real was his barking. If I said 'Menagerie,' he became a caravan of wild beasts; I undid a button of his waistcoat, and it was a lion that made a spring, roaring at me; I pulled his coat-tails, and off I went tugging at an old bear that swung a hind leg as he turned, in the queerest way, and then sat up, and beating his breast sent out a mew-moan. Our room was richer to me than all the Grange while these performances were going forward. His monkey was almost as wonderful as his bear, only he was too big for it, and was obliged to aim at reality in his representation of this animal by means of a number of breakages; a defect that brought our landlady on the scene." The Sundays of the pair are devoted to quieter but not less enthralling entertainments. "'Great Will' my father called Shakespeare, and 'Slender Billy,' Pitt. The scene where Great Will killed the deer, dragging Falstaff all over the park after it by the light of Bardolph's nose, upon which they put an extinguisher if they heard any of the keepers, and so left everybody groping about and catching the wrong person, was the most wonderful mixture of fun and tears. Great Will was extremely youthful, but everyone in the park called him 'Father William'; and when he wanted to know which way the deer had gone, King Lear (or else my memory

deceives me) punned, and Lady Macbeth waved a handkerchief for it to be steeped in the blood of the deer; Shylock ordered one pound of the carcase; Hamlet (the fact was impressed upon me) offered him a three-legged stool; and a number of kings and knights and ladies lit their torches from Bardolph; and away they flew, distracting the keepers and leaving Will and his troop to the deer. That poor thing died from a different weapon at each recital, though always with a flow of blood and a successful dash of his antlers into Falstaff; and to hear Falstaff bellow! But it was mournful to hear how sorry Great Will was over the animal he had slain. He spoke like music. I found it pathetic in spite of my knowing that the whole scene was lighted up by Bardolph's nose. When I was just bursting out crying—for the deer's tongue was lolling out and quick pantings were at his side, he had little ones at home—Great Will remembered his engagement to sell Shylock a pound of the carcase; determined that no Jew should eat of it, he bethought him that Falstaff could well spare a pound, and he said the Jew would not see the difference: Falstaff only got off by hard running, and roaring out that he knew his unclean life would make him taste like pork and thus let the Jew into the trick." Roy Richmond's irresponsibility and foolishness are well-nigh incredible; yet he has us by the heart-strings. In that great scene towards the close of the book, "Strange Revelations," in which Squire Beltham carries out his threat "to strip him stark till he flops down shivering into his slough a convicted, common swindler, with his dinners and balls and his private bands," and brings home to him the whole tale of his sins, we see him, not with the eyes of the old man who has truth and justice on his side, but with those of the high-bred



woman who, in the midst of this outburst, avows that Richmond has had her lifelong devotion and that he retains it still.

In the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth chapters of the book, England is revealed to us as she appears to German eyes, a country of pioneers, invaluable to the progress of humanity in past time, but to-day money-grabbing, "mindless and arrogant, and neither in the material or spiritual kingdom of noble or gracious stature:" condemned, as Ottilia, quoting and endorsing her professor, tells Harry, "to be overthrown and left behind, there to gain humility from the only teacher she can understand, poverty." The professor himself, Dr. Julius von Karsteg, develops the subject at length. What, he asks Harry abruptly, is his scheme of life? and makes use of his reply to tear his ideals to shreds. The wealthy English, he says, are an insufferable, unwarrantable class, without their parallel in Europe. Harry speaks vaguely of his dream of doing some good; the dream is dashed aside as common to every prince and millionaire that ever lived. Attempting to defend his country, Harry mentions our conquest and occupation of India: is not that something? "'Something,'" the professor snaps out, "'for non-commissioned officers to boast of, not for statesmen. However, say that you are fit to govern Asiatics, go on.' 'I would endeavour to equalise ranks at home, encourage the growth of ideas. . . .' 'Supporting a non-celibate clergy, and an intermingled aristocracy? Your endeavours, my good young man, will lessen like those of the man who employed a spade to uproot a rock. It wants blasting. Your married clergy and merchandised aristocracy are evils: they are the ivy about your social tree: you would resemble Laocoon in the

throes, if one could imagine you anything of a heroic figure.' ”

The book is life itself, many-sided, complex, digressive; but it is art also. The whole is rounded to its conclusion in the scene in which Harry returns to the Grange with Janet Ilchester, the girl long ago chosen by his grandfather to be his wife. As they approach, the sky is seen to hang reddened over Riversley, and, when the house comes in view, it is enveloped in flames; “fire at the wings, fire at the heart,” no vestige of the home of generations of Belthams is to be saved. Roy Richmond, failing and broken, but true to his character to the last, has been making preparation to receive Harry and his bride—“lamps, lights in all the rooms, torches in the hall, illuminations along the windows, stores of fireworks, such a display as only he could have dreamed of.” Once more the price of his foolishness is to pay. But the comedian himself is not forthcoming. In his solicitude for Dorothy Beltham, his lifelong benefactress, he has refused to leave the house. Roy Richmond has laid down his life.

## CHAPTER XI

### BEAUCHAMP'S CAREER AND MEREDITH'S POLITICAL VIEWS

IT is well known that Beauchamp's character was modelled upon that of the late Admiral Maxse. From boyhood till his death in 1900, Admiral Maxse was one of Meredith's most intimate friends. The volume *Modern Love, and Poems of the English Road-side* of 1862 is "affectionately dedicated to Captain Maxse, R.N."; *Modern Love*, a reprint; to which is added *The Sage Enamoured* and *The Honest Lady* is inscribed in 1892 "To Admiral Maxse, in constant friendship." In the year 1868 Frederick Maxse stood as Radical candidate for Southampton and was defeated. Meredith went through the campaign with his friend, and directly the election was over wrote *Beauchamp's Career* in his home; <sup>1</sup> Dr. Shrapnel, Carpendike, Oggler, even Tomlinson, and Algy Borolick are taken from life. The original of "Mount Laurels" is Holly Hill on the Hamble River, Southampton Water, which was at this time the Maxses' family home. The actuality of the story lends an added interest to this, Meredith's single political novel. To a man of his stature, political activity must be at the summit, or almost the summit, of human endeavour, and the range of his characters necessi-

<sup>1</sup> It appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* from August, 1874, to December, 1875, inclusive.

tates political allusions in most of his books. But details of Harry Richmond's candidature, or even of Sigismund Alvan and Diana Warwick's opinions, do not constitute a political novel. National interests, in these cases, are attributes of the characters, they are not the pivot on which the characters turn. Beauchamp's personal and private relations, on the other hand, are little but platforms by which we may mount to the startling conception of an Englishman passionately moved by abstractions. This tale, Meredith writes, is of one "born with so extreme and passionate a love for his country, that he thought all things else of mean importance in comparison. This day, this hour, this life, and even politics, the centre and throbbing heart of it, must be treated of: men, and the ideas of men, which are actually the motives of men in a greater degree than their appetites: these are my theme." And this statement as to the theme and its nature is answer to the dissatisfaction we may feel with Beauchamp in his relation to Cecilia and even to Jenny. With Renée in Venice he is whole-hearted indeed; but his career has not then opened; we have only, as it were, the material on which his idealism is to work. And even here we may, if we will, have a foretaste of what is to be, in that great scene on the Adriatic when Beauchamp has had the boat put about, and refuses to allow Renée's brother to turn it again towards Venice. For, even in that passionate moment, Beauchamp's mind is accessible to fact. The lover's dream of a world subservient to his wishes has been his for an hour; but Rosamund Culling's reminder of his financial dependence on his uncle "strikes his hot brain with a bar as of iron." And later, it is with Renée, when she has fled to him from her husband, that Beauchamp sets his conviction of "the world's dues, fees, and

claims" to confront his agonised longings and subdue them. "Beauchampism," Meredith writes, "may be said to stand for nearly everything which is the obverse of Byronism, and rarely woos your sympathy, shuns the statuesque pathetic, or any kind of posturing. . . . His faith is in working and fighting." No one is better qualified than Meredith to expose a youth, attempting the reformation of his elders, in ludicrous light. In Beauchamp's case he betrays no such desire, and the reason for this he gives at the outset of the story. Proud of his fire and good looks, his uncle Everard would have spoiled Nevil Beauchamp in his childhood, had not the boy's "veneration of heroes living and dead kept down his conceit." Nevil is a hero-worshipper, "possessed by reverence for men of deeds," and incapable therefore of esteeming himself—who has done nothing—highly. Destined by his uncle for the navy, to which he is to be despatched at fourteen, as that age approaches he expresses a desire to stay longer at school. "The fellow would like to be a parson!" Everard Romfrey exclaims in disgust. "I'd rather enlist for a soldier," says Nevil, in repudiation of the charge and in despair of explaining his true motive. But to his uncle's housekeeper, his dear friend Rosamund Culling, he confides that, in one particular, parsons are enviable—they have time to read history and decide which party was right in our civil war. He hates bloodshed, and, to his uncle Everard's mind, comes dangerously near "the cotton-spinner's babble" in speaking of it. He even seems to have got hold of some Manchester sarcasms touching Glory. "He said: 'I don't care to win glory; I know all about that; I've seen an old hat in the Louvre.' And he would have Rosamund to suppose that he had looked on the campaigning head-cover of Napoleon simply as a shocking,



bad, bald, brown-rubbed old *tricorne*, rather than as the nod of extinction to thousands, the great orb of darkness, the still-trembling gloomy quiver—the brain of the lightnings of battles.” But, Meredith explains, “this boy nursed no secret presumptuous belief that he was fitted for the walks of the higher intellect; he was not having his impudent boy’s fling at superiority over the superior.” His shrinking from the career before him amounted almost to terror; all the same, he returned from his first voyage—as his uncle said he would—a gallant sailor lad. And a year or two later during the Crimean War, Everard Romfrey finds himself obliged, by reports of Nevil’s turn for overdoing his duty, to write to him: “Braggadocioing in deeds is only next bad to mouthing it. Remember that we want *soldiers* and *sailors*, not *suicides*.” As Nevil’s great-aunt Beauchamp sagely points out, much trouble would have been spared if the lad had stayed at school and gone on to college. Probably in an atmosphere of words he would have been bled of his plethora of ideas. As it was, they accumulated to unwieldy proportions. But it is one of Meredith’s favourite distinctions between the great and the small-natured, that the former reverence and the latter despise what is unfathomable to them; and it was Nevil’s safeguard that he was always finding, in books and in his fellows, more than he found in himself. His early choice of Carlyle as his favourite author was largely based on the obscurity of his diction. He “liked a bone in his mouth to gnaw at,” he said. Beauchamp is without rival among Meredith’s masculine characters. His author has avoided the danger of running him into his favourite heroic mould. Gallant and upright as Wentworth and Whitford and Weyburn, Beauchamp has far more complexity. Meredith has written elsewhere: “Men who have the

woman in them without being womanised, they are the pick of men,"<sup>1</sup> and we suspect the generalisation has basis at least in his knowledge of Beauchamp. A lover of all that is graceful and gracious—"Beauty," we are told, "plucked the heart from his breast"—he took up arms for his fellows, "drank of the *questioning* cup, that which denieth peace to us, and which projects us on the missionary search of the How, the Wherefore, and the Why not, ever afterward. He questioned his justification, and yours, for gratifying tastes in an ill-regulated world of wrong-doing, suffering, sin, and bounties unrighteously dispensed—not sufficiently dispersed. He said by-and-by to pleasure, battle to-day." In Beauchamp's character, a type of youth happily not unfamiliar—the best type of our day—is portrayed with absolute success; one in which disregard of means to ends, and consequent want of effectiveness, are due, not to conceit or impatience, but to an over-enthusiastic belief in the immediate capacity for amendment of men and of things.

Rosamund Culling is one of the most delightful persons in the book and in the whole of Meredith's work. Widow of a distinguished military officer, she is a gentlewoman in every sense of the word, and a woman of the world into the bargain. Consequently, the fact that many of the chief incidents of the plot gather round the scandal occasioned by her social position as Everard Romfrey's housekeeper, and that even Beauchamp, who has loved her from childhood, looks on his uncle's marriage with her as a *mésalliance*, appears to our eyes very strange. Mr. Trevelyan has remarked that when Meredith is out of touch with the thought of this generation it is usually because he is ahead of it. In matters of fundamental importance

<sup>1</sup> *The Tragic Comedians*, chapter VII.

this is undoubtedly true. In matters of detail certain changes have taken place. Minor social distinctions are, happily, not so marked as they were. And ideas as to age have altered remarkably. Lady Charlotte Chillingworth's contemplation of marriage is hastened by the fact that, for her, the "thirty fatal bells have struck"; when Diana Warwick, disciplined and experienced, is allowed to fall back at last on the mature business-man of the book, a man whom we of the present day would guess to be fifty at least, the reader is astounded to learn that he is thirty-three years of age; and Renée de Croisnel, on the eve of her marriage with the Marquis de Rouaillout, is but just seventeen.

Renée is French, and Nevil, who has saved her brother's life in the war, meets her in Venice. Nevil is wounded, and his days are spent with Renée and Roland gliding in and out of the canals in an open gondola, which Renée has decorated in imitation of Carpaccio's glories. "A brunette of the fine lineaments of the good blood of France, she chattered snatches of Venetian caught from the gondoliers, she was like a delicate cup of crystal brimming with the beauty of the place, and making one of them drink in all his impressions through her." In her is centred Meredith's strong feeling for Venice, which, apparent in much of his work, finds fullest expression in *Beauchamp's Career*. Renée adroitly sums up one aspect of the place, when Beauchamp reminds her that in study of Ruskin she is missing the scenes. "'The scenes,'" she exclaims, "'are green shutters, wet steps, barcaroli, brown women, striped posts, a scarlet night-cap, a sick fig-tree, an old shawl, faded spots of colour, peeling walls. They might be figured by a trodden melon.'" But the poignant beauty of Venice so encompasses Renée and Nevil that the intensity of their relation seems never

quite recaptured in the stormier scenes at Tourdestelle. Venice has been the French girl's dream, and at first the reality disenchanting her. She is petulant with the present, and hungry for the past, "for the flashing colours and pageantries, and the threads of desperate adventure crossing the rii to this and that palace door and balcony, like faint blood streaks; the times of Venice in full flower." Fascinated as he is by her whimsical grace, it is impossible to Nevil to perceive her wrongheadedness without attempting to right it. He reads Ruskin, and she reasons against him. That period of faith and stone-cutting must, she insists, have been "Huguenot—harsh, nasal, sombre, insolent, self-sufficient." If the Venice of her love was indeed the Venice of the decadence, it should not bear the whole of the blame. "'We are known by our fruits, are we not? and the Venice I admire was surely the fruit of these stone-cutters chanting hymns of faith; it could not but be: and if it deserved, as he says, to die disgraced, I think we should go back to them, and ask them whether their minds were as pure and holy as he supposes.' Her French wits would not be subdued. Nevil pointed to the palaces. 'Pride,' said she. He argued that the original Venetians were not responsible for their offspring. 'You say it?' she cried, 'You, of an old race? Oh, no; you do not feel it!' and the trembling fervour of her voice convinced him that he did not, could not. Renée said, 'I know my ancestors are bound up in me by my sentiments to them; and so do you, M. Nevil. We shame them if we fail in courage and honour. Is it not so? If we break a single pledged word we cast shame on them. Why, that makes us what we are, that is our distinction: we dare not be weak if we would. And therefore when Venice is reproached with avarice and luxury, I choose to say



—what do we hear of the children of misers? and I say that I am certain that those old cold Huguenot stone-cutters were proud and grasping. I am sure they were, and they *shall* share the blame.’” She and Nevil stand together to gaze on setting Venice in the stern of the boat in which, under Rosamund Culling’s protection, they spend their last night before the arrival of Renée’s elderly marquis. “The faint red Doge’s palace was like the fading of another sunset north-westward of the glory along the hills. Venice dropped lower and lower, breasting the waters, until it was a thin line in air. The line was broken, and ran in dots, with here and there a pillar standing on opal sky. At last the topmost campanile sank.” Nevil sleeps on deck, and wakes with the light to behold the peaks at the head of the gulf—a vivid host above the snow-fields—kindled one by one to crimson flame. “Nevil’s personal rapture craved for Renée with the second long breath he drew; and now the curtain of her tent-cabin parted, and greeting him with a half-smile, she looked out. The Adriatic was dark, the Alps had heaven to themselves. Crescents and hollows, rosy mounds, white shelves, shining ledges, domes and peaks, all the towering heights were in illumination from Friuli into farthest Tyrol; beyond earth to the stricken senses of the gazers. Colour was steadfast on the massive front ranks: it wavered in the remoteness, and was quick and dim as though it fell on beating wings; but there too divine colour seized and shaped forth solid forms, and thence away to others in uttermost distances where the incredible flickering gleam of new heights arose, that soared, or stretched their white uncertain curves in sky like wings traversing infinity. It seemed unlike morning to the lovers, but as if night had broken with a revelation of the kingdom in the heart of night. While



the broad, smooth waters rolled unlighted beneath that transfigured upper sphere, it was possible to think the scene might vanish like a view caught out of darkness by lightning. Alp over burning Alp, and around them a hueless dawn!"

Our next chapter contains a summary of Meredith's treatment of Egoism in the Prelude to *The Egoist*. Of a survivor of that "grand old Egoism" which "afore-time built the House" no better example than the Hon. Everard Romfrey is to be found. He comes of a long race of fighting earls, "a savour of North Sea foam and ballad pirates" about their earliest history, chivalrous knights later, and leaders in the field; "good landlords, good masters, blithely followed to the wars. Sing an old battle of Normandy, Picardy, Gascony, and you celebrate deeds of theirs." At the time the story opens the Earls of Romfrey from their topmost towers "spied few spots in the wide circle of the heavens" that were not their own. The Hon. Everard (Stephen Denely Craven) Romfrey, third son of the late Earl, with a good prospect of inheriting the title, in mind is a mediæval baron. He had been at one time "a hot Parliamentarian, calling himself a Whig, called by the Whigs a Radical, called by the Radicals a Tory, and very happy in fighting them all round." He stood for King, Lords, and Commons; "Commons he added out of courtesy." His real interest is the preservation of his game. Beside this, all other matters sink to insignificance, and it is on the question of his fellows' attitude to the Game Laws that his partialities or antipathies turn. Childless and a widower, he adopted his sister's son, Nevil Beauchamp, in his babyhood. Throughout, his affection for Nevil is deep, but he and Shrapnel ally themselves with poachers, and are therefore, incontestably, mad. Everard Romfrey is, in

the old sense of the word, a gentleman ; his instincts are everything that Willoughby Patterne's are not. Indeed, Romfrey's nature differs so widely from Willoughby's that we cannot but question whether Meredith does not intend the Patternes' comparatively recent acquisition of wealth and estates to account for Willoughby's mean-mindedness. Everard Romfrey is as chivalrous to his dependants as to his equals ; slightly more so perhaps, from the tradition that service constitutes a bond. Rosamund Culling dares, without fear of offence to her ears, probe him as to the grounds of the fight on her behalf between the boy Nevil and his cousin Cecil Baskett, " sure that he would at all costs protect a woman's delicacy, and a dependant's, man or woman." When Nevil is Radical candidate for Bevisham, Romfrey almost succeeds in decoying him into driving into the town side by side with the Conservative candidate who is to be sprung upon him. Yet the idea of disinheriting the lad for his opinions hardly occurs to his uncle. When Rosamund Culling is his wife and Countess of Romfrey, she compels him, for her sake and in thought of their child, to go and apologise to the man he has horse-whipped ; the task is intensely repugnant to him ; but, when at last he is persuaded to it, he goes without a thought of reminding her of her responsibility for his original action. He arrives at Dr. Shrapnel's house deeply prejudiced against him and all his belongings ; nevertheless, he treats the doctor's niece, Jenny Denham, as though she were Cecilia Halkett, and recognises in her a distinction that even Cecilia does not possess. The struggle between Romfrey and Beauchamp runs through the book ; throughout Romfrey perceives the quality of his antagonist, and appreciates it most when he has to acknowledge himself beaten. At the close of the story Nevil, who has been for weeks at death's

door, is struggling to life. News of his engagement to Jenny Denham reaches the Earl and his wife. Rosamund, with her passionate attachment to Beauchamp, is shocked to find that the girl is hardly in love. "She asked the earl's opinion of the startling intelligence, and of the character of that Miss Denham, who could pen such a letter, after engaging to give her hand to Nevil. Lord Romfrey laughed in his dumb way. 'If Nevil must have a wife—and the marquise tells you so, and she ought to know—he may as well marry a girl who won't go all the way downhill with him at his pace. He'll be cogged.' 'You do not object to such an alliance?' 'I'm past objection. There's no law against a man's marrying his nurse.' 'But she is not even in love with him!' 'I dare say not. He wants a wife: she accepts a husband. The two women, who were in love with him, he wouldn't have.' Lady Romfrey sighed deeply: 'He has lost Cecilia! She might still have been his: but he has taken to that girl. And Madame de Rouaillout praises the girl because—oh! I see it—she has less to be jealous of in Miss Denham, of whose birth and blood we know nothing. Let that pass. If only she loved him! I cannot endure the thought of his marrying a girl who is not in love with him.' 'Just as you like, my dear.' 'Oh, what an end of so brilliant a beginning!' 'It strikes me, my dear,' said the earl, 'it's the proper common-sense beginning that may have a fairish end.' 'No, but what I feel is that he—our Nevil—has accomplished hardly anything, if anything.' 'He hasn't marched on London with a couple of hundred thousand men: no, he hasn't done that,' the earl said, glancing back in mind through Beauchamp's career. 'And he escapes what Stukely calls his nation's scourge, in the shape of a statue turned out by an English chisel. No: we haven't had

much public excitement out of him. But one thing he did do: *he got me down on my knees!*' Lord Romfrey pronounced these words with a sober emphasis that struck the humour of it sharply into Rosamund's heart, through some contrast it presented between Nevil's aim at the world and hit of a man: the immense deal thought of it by the Earl, and the very little that Nevil would think of it—the great domestic achievement to be boasted of by an enthusiastic devotee of politics! She embraced her husband with peals of loving laughter: the last laughter heard at Romfrey Castle for many a day."

Dr. Shrapnel, Beauchamp's political mentor and the mouthpiece of his ideals, talks like Carlyle; and in his semi-chaotic forms of expression Meredith finds a congenial channel of thought. Extracts from Shrapnel's letters to Beauchamp figure also in the book, often lengthy and discursive, but almost always notable. "Professors, prophets, masters," he writes, "each hitherto has had his creed and system to offer, good mayhap for the term; and each has put it forth for the truth everlasting, to drive the dagger to the heart of time, and put the axe to human growth—so where at first light shone to light the yawning frog to his wet ditch, there, with the necessitated revolution of men's minds in the course of ages, *darkness radiates*." "In our prayers we dedicate the world to God, not calling Him great for a title, no—showing we know Him great in a limitless world, Lord of a truth we tend to, have not grasped. . . . We make prayer a part of us, praying for no gifts, no interventions; through the faith in prayer opening the soul to the undiscerned. And take this, my Beauchamp, for the good in prayer, that it makes us repose on the unknown with confidence, makes us flexible to change, makes us ready for revolution—

for life then! He who has the fountain of prayer in him will not complain of hazards. Prayer is the recognition of laws; the soul's exercise and source of strength." And Shrapnel talks as he writes. One evening, while Nevil is convalescent, he is starting for Bevisham. Jenny Denham reminds him that Captain Beauchamp is not as yet strong enough to receive deputations, and Nevil himself adds: "No, no deputations; let them send Killick, if they want to say anything." "Wrong!" cries the doctor, "wrong! wrong! Six men won't hurt you more than one. . . . Trust me, Beauchamp, if we shun to encounter the good, warm soul of numbers, our hearts are narrowed to them. The business of our modern world is to open heart and stretch out arms to numbers. In numbers we have our sinews; they are our iron and gold." Shrapnel's opinions are almost undilutedly Meredith's; it need not be remarked, therefore, that they are excellent. But so colossal is the range of opinion he expresses that his author leaves little room for his personal characteristics. Seymour Austin's excellent summary of Shrapnel's shortcomings is the more noteworthy in that it is partially applicable to Beauchamp also, though in Beauchamp's case social tact and quick intuitions are his safeguard from an equal degree of uncouthness. "Dr. Shrapnel," says Austin, "is the earnest man, and flies at politics as uneasy young brains fly to literature, fancying they can write because they can write with a pen. He perceives a bad adjustment of things; which is correct. He is honest, and takes his honesty for a virtue: and that entitles him to believe in himself: and that belief causes him to see in all opposition to him the wrong he has perceived in existing circumstances: and so in a dream of power he invokes the people: and as they do not stir, he



takes to prophecy. This is the round of the politics of impatience. The study of politics should be guided by some light of statesmanship, otherwise it comes to this wild preaching. These men are theory-tailors, not politicians."

Allusion has been made in one of the earlier chapters of this book to Meredith's antagonism to the Manchester School of politicians. The existence of *Beauchamp's Career* makes an explanation of this antagonism less necessary than otherwise it might have been. For Beauchamp sets out, accepting his uncle's attitude to Cobden and Bright, and, later, comes to rank himself on their side. He keeps, however, one reservation throughout; his feeling for the Army and Navy is part of his birthright. When his opponents remind him that the Liberals and Radicals grudge money for armaments, his only reply is that in this respect the Conservatives are hardly better. That is, while his intellect accepts the humanitarian doctrines of progress, his class instincts revolt against certain immediate applications of them. And this brings us to a point that is better admitted at once. Both Meredith and Beauchamp refer, at times, to the middle and mercantile classes as a strength to the country. They force themselves to a concession and feel their duty done. But the only sentiment they possess is for the classes above and below the commercial. The one appeals to their tastes, the other is the field of their idealism. The intermediate region represents little more, to their minds, than a dead-weight of obstruction. Material wealth degenerating towards materialism is the curse of their country; for its crying need is permeation with ideas. Among those at the top of the ladder, those satiated with the good things of this world, there are many indeed whose minds are difficult enough to

enkindle, but, partly because their life is more cosmopolitan, these persons look upon intellectual brilliancy as a social requisite. And those at the bottom of the scale, those who are starving, are open enough to ideas. "Tall talk," says Everard Romfrey, "is their jewelry: they must have their dandification in bunkum"; they listen agape to all who profess to prescribe for their needs. The stronghold of intellectual sluggishness, then, is the prosperous but untraditioned middle class. In short, the rise of the manufacturing politician appeared to betoken the rapidly increasing national influence of mere wealth divorced from tradition. And the fact that the "cotton-spinner's" voice first made itself heard in the interests of Peace was likely to obscure for Meredith and Beauchamp the points of similarity in their creeds. England's bungling into the Crimean war occurred, in Meredith's view, because "we really had been talking gigantic nonsense of peace, and of the everlastingness of the exchange of fruits for money, with angels waving raw-groceries of Eden in joy of the commercial picture," and the "George Foxite" speech of Manchester was easy to mistake for the trade-at-any-price cry, "the cry of the belly," wishful to dominate the intellect and muscle of the country.

Even if it were in no other way interesting or valuable, *Beauchamp's Career* would claim attention for its re-creation of the political atmosphere of two generations ago, with its unlikeness and likeness to that of our time. When the story begins, France is still the hereditary enemy of England, and terror of French invasion a living thing. This is augmented by distrust of Louis Napoleon and just indignation at his cowing of Paris by the massacre of unarmed citizens; and these feelings have been stirred by Lord Palmerston and

*The Times* into a panic. The country is told that it may wake any morning to find that fifty thousand Frenchmen have landed on its shores in the night. The panic grows to ludicrous proportions; the Militia Bill is passed; and the death and funeral of the Duke of Wellington aid in turning the minds of the promoters of the Great Exhibition to war and warlike exploits.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile Russia has aided Austria to crush Kossuth and Hungaria, and by so doing has induced an anti-Russian alliance between the humanitarian and jingo sentiment in England. The powder is stored: Russia crosses the Preuth, and the match is alight. Meredith pays tribute to "the dauntless Lancastrian who thundered like a tempest over a gambling tent, disregarded," and to the three Quakers who, on the eve of the war, made a pilgrimage to the Czar beseeching him to give way "for piety's sake"; but is he, we wonder, aware that facts connected with this mission provide the strongest possible justification for his anti-Press fulminations?<sup>2</sup>

It is necessary, however, to guard against giving the impression that *Beauchamp's Career* is devoted to political and abstract considerations at the expense of more personal interests. Any such notion would be far from the truth. Beauchamp's opinions are forceful by virtue of the fire and intensity of the nature holding them. Their depth is made clear to us in chapters such as "The Trial of Him" and "The Two Passions," where we see his convictions withstanding an almost overmastering desire to regard the horror of Renée's

<sup>1</sup> See Mr. Morley's *Life of Richard Cobden*, Vol. II, chap. v. "The Invasion Panic."

<sup>2</sup> The three Friends—Robert Charlton, Henry Pease, and Joseph Sturge—were waiting in St. Petersburg, at the Czar's request, for his final decision, when certain issues of *The Times* arrived, which by their insulting and inflammatory articles put an end to negotiations for peace.

situation and the hopelessness of his own—their common unhappiness—as a reason for social revolt. Renée is before him, maturer but no less exquisite than at their first meeting in Venice; her courage is proved by her flight; she has riches, and she takes their journey to Italy or Greece, and their life there together, for granted. “What,” Nevil’s spirit cries out, “has the world done for us, that a joy so immeasurable should be rejected on its behalf? And what have we succeeded in doing, that the childish effort to move it should be continued at such a cost?” It is against temptation intense and subtle as this that love for his country and Shrapnel’s teaching prevail.

From *Beauchamp’s Career* we may readily and naturally pass to the political opinions of its author’s later life. Meredith’s political utterances have been numerous, and they are all noteworthy. They cover a wide range of topics, and find expression in poetry as well as in prose. *Foresight and Patience*<sup>1</sup> is a masterly philosophic statement of his general outlook, particulars of which may be found in his novels and in the columns of the daily press. His Irish sympathies, for instance, expressed with much clearness in *Diana*, provide two articles in reference to the Home Rule controversy of 1886. The first, *A Pause in the Strife*,<sup>2</sup> deals with Mr. Gladstone and his Bill, and is prophetic as well as illuminating. Mr. Gladstone, Meredith says, “has not been defeated. The question set on fire by him will never be extinguished until the combustible matter has gone to ashes. But personally he meets a sharp rebuff. The Tories may well raise hurrahs over that. Radicals have to admit it, and point to the grounds of it. Between a man’s enemies and his friends there comes out

<sup>1</sup> *A Reading of Life*. Published in the *National Review*, 1894.

<sup>2</sup> *The Pall Mall Gazette*, July 9th, 1886.

a rough painting of his character, not without a resemblance to the final summary, albeit wanting in the justly delicate historical touch to particular features. On one side Mr. Gladstone is abused as the 'one man power,' lauded on the other for his marvellous intuition of the popular will. One can believe that he scarcely wishes to act dictatorially, and full surely his Egyptian policy was from step to step a misreading of the will of the English people. He went forth on this campaign with the finger of Egypt not ineffectively levelled against him a second time. Nevertheless he does read his English; he has, too, the fatal tendency to the bringing forth of Bills in the manner of Jove big with Minerva. He perceived the necessity, and the issue of the necessity; clearly divined what must come, and with a higher motive than the vanity with which his enemies charge him, though not with such high counsel as Wisdom at his ear, fell to work on it alone, produced the whole Bill alone, and then handed it to his Cabinet to digest, too much in love with the thing he had laid and incubated to permit of any serious dismemberment of its frame. Hence the disruption. He worked for the future, produced a Bill for the future, and is wrecked in the present. Probably he can work in no other way than from the impulse of his enthusiasm solitarily. It is a way of making men overweeningly in love with their creations. The consequence is likely to be that Ireland will get her full measure of justice to appease her cravings earlier than she would have had so much from the United Liberal Cabinet, but at a cost both to her and to England. Meanwhile we are to have a House of Commons incapable of conducting public business; the tradesmen to whom *The Times* addressed pathetic condolences on the loss of their season, will lose more than one; and we shall be made sensible that



we have an enemy in our midst, until a people, slow to think, have taken counsel of their native generosity to put trust in the most generous race on earth." The second article, *Concessions to the Celt*, was published in the *Fortnightly Review* for October, 1886, and the whole situation is reviewed at length in it.

A letter of Meredith's addressed to the Dorking Women's Liberal Association<sup>1</sup> is of paramount importance for its definition of the ideals of the party to which he belongs :—"We who believe in Liberalism," he says, "do not doubt that as women's intellects expand and sharpen they will join with the party of progress, which, without rejecting such wisdom as was given by our forefathers, aims at a condition of things in harmony with the wider and deeper knowledge we have won, the nobler ambition, the more human interest in the welfare of our fellows." To suggest that the chief interest of the letter lies in this definition is not to imply that Meredith's voice in regard to women's participation in public affairs is uncertain in tone. He is a staunch believer in Women's Suffrage, and, spite of his grave consciousness of feminine emotionalism and timidity, he would grant it at once. What is meant is rather that Meredith's championship of women in his novels and poems has been too detailed and explicit to need rehearsal, too fundamental and delicate to be summarised. And this brings us face to face with a difficulty. There are persons, in our Colonies at least, who only know Meredith's name in connection with a suggestion in the newspapers of a ten years' or limited contract for marriage. The letter containing this suggestion, which appears to have been commented on wherever English is spoken, appeared in September, 1904. The key to its existence is found in words towards the close of it :

<sup>1</sup> May, 1904.

"This subject is kept too much in darkness. Air it! Air it!" To those acquainted with Meredith's works, or method of thought, this tocsin was harmless enough. As an appeal to an ignorant and far wider circle it cannot but be regretted. For the man who perhaps of all living writers has the deepest conviction of the subtlety and complexity of the interests that marriage involves has appeared to treat them with levity. For close on fifty years he had been speaking of the question with the caution and delicacy it demands, and without much effect; for once he was betrayed into a manner of speech to which his countrymen attended, not much to their credit. To attempt to wipe out the effect of the letter by isolated quotation from Meredith's works would be to fall into similar error. But for the benefit of any who may have viewed the demonstration contained in it as a serious manifesto, it may well be compared with a letter in *Beauchamp's Career* in which Dr. Shrapnel dismisses individualistic conceptions of marriage. "Society," he says, "is our one tangible gain, our one roofing and flooring in a world of most uncertain structures built on morasses. Towards the laws that support it men hopeful of progress give their adhesion. If it is martyrdom, what then? Let martyrdom be. Contumacy is animalism. The truer the love, the readier for sacrifice! *Rebellion against Society and advocacy of humanity run counter.*"

As the last of our quotations from newspaper contributions, space must be found for a letter written to the Croydon electors on the eve of the last election, proof enough in itself that Meredith's seventy-eight years had not robbed his hand of its cunning. "We view," he writes, "a stormy sea of the disruption of parties, and Conservatives will own, as promptly as Liberals perceive, that the mover of this turbulent state

is the life of it. His supporters, as a fighting body, are swallowed up in his person. Mr. Joseph Chamberlain was once a light of the Radical ranks; he is now enrolled among the Tories; he was a Free-trader; he has become a Protectionist, and he has been thoughtlessly called a renegade. He is merely the man of a tremendous energy acting upon one idea. Formerly it was the Radical and Free-trade; now it is the Tory and Protectionist idea; and he is quite in earnest; altogether at the mercy of the idea animating him. You see it in his lean, long head and adventurous nose. Men of such a kind are dangerous to their country. They are usually, as he is, adroit debaters; persuasive speakers; energised, as he is, by petrol within to drive swift and defiant of opposition to a mark in view. Mr. Chamberlain is one of the motor-men occasionally let loose on us to stir convulsion. The motor-man of Highbury is assured that he can persuade the working-man that by accepting a tax on his loaf he will have in return full employment and higher wages—that is to say, the reward of a promise in the clouds for a positive dead loss. He would persuade the country that Protection leads to no war of Continental tariffs, nor to the encouragement of monopolies, nor to the renewal of the times of Will Watch the bold smuggler, nor to the various chicaneries practised before the days of repeal. It would be a demented country that believed him. It cannot be that Croydon will consent to be ranked as one of the crazy, for, if Mr. Chamberlain wins, the country is on its downward way at motor speed."

In outlining Meredith's political opinions, it would obviously be ridiculous to confine our references to Great Britain or even to British dominions. "The world," he has said, "is being visibly universalised. To deny us this larger citizenship is the worst pro-

vincialism." His memorial to the struggle for Italian Independence has been considered already; *Harry Richmond* contains, in the Professor's indictment of England, and Ottilia's training and character, a magnificent tribute to German culture and idealism; Alvan's account of his interview with Ironsides in *The Tragic Comedians* is a masterly presentation of Ferdinand Lasalle's attitude to Bismarck and his party. And, in these latter days, Meredith's interest in Russia has been evinced in practical forms. But among the nations of Europe France holds the largest place in his heart. In regard to his magnificent poem, *France, December, 1870*,<sup>1</sup> we cannot do better than refer the reader to Mr. Trevelyan,<sup>2</sup> who quotes and enlarges on lines such as these, of questioning and dismay, written in the very month when France was laid low:—

We look for her that sunlike stood  
 Upon the forehead of our day,  
 An orb of nations, radiating food  
 For body and for mind alway.  
 Where is the Shape of glad array;  
 The nervous hands, the front of steel,  
 The clarion tongue? Where is the bold, proud face?  
 We see a vacant place;  
 We hear an iron heel.

and these of tribute and thanksgiving for her lead in  
 1789.

O she that made the brave appeal  
 For manhood when our time was dark,  
 And from our fetters drove the spark  
 Which was as lightning to reveal  
 New seasons, with the swifter play  
 Of pulses, and benigner day;  
 She that divinely shook the dead  
 From living man; that stretched ahead  
 Her resolute forefinger straight,  
 And marched toward the gloomy gate  
 Of earth's Untried. . . .

<sup>1</sup> The *Fortnightly Review*, January, 1871. Republished in *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History*, 1898.

<sup>2</sup> *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith*. G. M. Trevelyan.

A constant reader of French literature, both contemporary and classic, Meredith has scattered appreciative references to France and her people up and down the pages of his books. Renée's features had "the soft irregularities which run to rarities of beauty as the ripple rocks the light; mouth, eyes, brows, nostrils, and bloomy cheeks played into one another liquidly; thought flew, tongue followed, and the flash of meaning quivered over them like night lightning." She was not so beautiful a woman as Cecilia, but "on which," we are asked, "does the eye linger longest? which draws the heart? a radiant landscape, where the tall, ripe wheat flashes between shadow and shine in the stately march of Summer, or the peep into dewy woodland on to dark water?" Alvan compares Clotilde with Paris, "his beloved of cities—the symbolised goddess of the lightning brain that is quick to conceive, eager to realise ideas, impassioned for her hero, but ever putting him to proof, graceful beyond all rhyme, colloquial as never the Muse; light in light hands, yet valiant unto death for a principle; and therefore not light, anything but light in strong hands, very steadfast rather: and oh! constantly entertaining." The French people avoid the "malady of sameness, our modern malady": they are entertaining, they are complex; and perhaps it is for this latter quality that Meredith, not uncharacteristically, admires them most. "They are the most mixed of any European nation, so they are packed with contrasts: they are full of sentiment, they are sharply logical, free-thinkers, devotees; affectionate, ferocious, frivolous, tenacious; the passion of the season operating like sun or moon on their qualities; and they can reach to ideality out of sensualism. Below your level, they are above it: a paradox is at home with them.'" <sup>1</sup> "The most mixed of any European nation,"

<sup>1</sup> *One of our Conquerors*, chapter XI.



that, from Meredith, is the choicest of compliments; for he entertains the firmest belief in the beneficial effects of international marriages. He almost always requires that the English blood of his heroines shall be vivified by a strain of Irish or Welsh; Emilia's is of course half Italian, and Aminta's is enlivened by an admixture of Spanish. Moreover, his often-expressed belief in the fast-arriving supremacy of the United States among English-speaking peoples is largely based on their cosmopolitanism and mingling of nationalities.

It is well known that Meredith, among other media, has turned also to poetry for the expression of his political ideals. In the space at our disposal it would be impossible to make anything approaching a complete survey of his political poems; but *The Empty Purse* has elsewhere received attention, and mention at least must be made here of the sonnet *To J. M.*,<sup>1</sup> of the *Lines* to the same in the *Fortnightly Review*,<sup>2</sup> and the sonnets *At the Close*<sup>3</sup> and *Hawarden*,<sup>4</sup> the *Odes in Contribution to French History*, and last, and most important of all, the poem *Foresight and Patience*<sup>5</sup> already alluded to. Meredith has declared his conviction that our present hope is in Liberalism, but that Liberalism cannot hold together except on an animate and animating principle. In one sense he always has been, and always will be, a fighter: he is firmly persuaded that "submission to evil is a distinct evil in itself"; but no man living more despises jingo-Imperialism, or more heartily detests its manifestations in the Press. His personal inclination being towards French journalism with its more delicate methods of controversy, he finds some of the developments of our

<sup>1</sup> To John Morley. *Poems and Lyrics*.

<sup>2</sup> December, 1867.

<sup>3</sup> On the South African War, written in October, 1899. *A Reading of Life*.

<sup>4</sup> *A Reading of Life*.

<sup>5</sup> *A Reading of Life*.

latter-day newspapers singularly difficult to bear. He said in conversation with Mr. W. T. Stead, in March, 1904, "I hold as strongly as ever I did to the reality of the general onward sweep of the human race; but as to whether the English are keeping pace in that movement I have my doubts. Some thirty years ago I began to feel this, and mentioned it to a great friend of mine, one of our modern statesmen, but he would not hear of it. The other day when I repeated my fears to him, he sighed heavily, and said he feared it was too true, and that our fatal lack of imagination was at the bottom of it all." In *Foresight and Patience* he has made clear to us that his trust in Liberalism, his faith in democracy, is no facile optimism based on blinking or ignorance of facts. He sees the millions as they are, and Foresight—the spirit of progress in his dialogue—expresses what he sees:—

Their field of tares they take for pasture grass.  
How waken them that have not any bent  
Save browsing—the concrete indifferent !  
Friend Lucifer supplies them solid stuff ;  
They fear not for the race when full the trough.  
They have much fear of giving up the ghost ;  
And these are of mankind the unnumbered host.

Admit some other features : Faithless, mean ;  
Encased in matter ; vowed to Gods obscene ;  
Contemptuous of the impalpable, it swells  
On Doubt ; for pastime swallows miracles.

Patience, admitting the truth of the indictment, points out to Foresight that our age's special task is the broadening and strengthening of foundations, and that this work has already begun. Foresight listens reproved, and rejoins :—

That rings of truth ! More do your people thrive ;  
Your many are more merrily alive  
Than erewhile when I gloried in the page  
Of radiant singer and anointed sage.

Greece was my lamp : burnt out for lack of oil ;  
Rome, Python Rome, prey of its robber spoil !  
All structures built upon a narrow space  
Must fall, for having not your hosts for base.

And aided by Patience, the spirit of Progress is enabled  
to close the dialogue and the poem thus :—

Advantage to the Many : that we name  
God's voice ; have there the surety in our aim.  
This thought unto my sister do I owe,  
And irony and satire off me throw. . . .  
Now let the perils thicken : clearer seen,  
Your Chieftain Mind mounts over them serene.  
Who never yet of scattered lamps was born  
To speed a world, a marching world to warn,  
But sunward from the vivid Many springs,  
Counts conquest but a step, and through disaster sings.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE IDEA OF COMEDY, THE SAGE ENAMOURED, AND THE EGOIST

MEREDITH'S *Essay on Comedy*, though not published in book form till 1897, appeared first in *The New Quarterly Magazine* twenty years earlier, having previously been delivered as a lecture at the London Institution on the 1st of February in the same year. It is presumable that the Comic Spirit presided in person at this lecture; and conjecturable that no audience was summoned beyond a score of historic notables, headed by Aristophanes himself, now assembled to hear their contributions to the well-spring of human laughter distinguished and appreciated as they had never been before. Possibly the chief nations of the modern world sent representatives also; but clearly these were not expected and, if they came, must in most cases have enjoyed the lecture less. We can believe that the company seldom, if ever, joined in the collective laugh, except for one grand outburst at the expense of an unhappy Arab, evidently admitted by mistake. The general aspect was of an intellectual banquet, a feast of the sly smile.

The ten years now elapsed since the final publication of the lecture have given the world opportunity to take the flavour of a dish, which, when first offered, touched the common palate with so tempered, so refined a subtlety, that its lasting qualities must have been missed. To read the essay once is to be stimulated and

entertained ; but it is only after many readings that a normal mind can hope to comprehend the completeness, the precision, the finality of what is said. Not only is the nature of the Comic itself defined, but the various emotions which may enter into it and transform it are distinguished and interrelated with consummate skill, and in language of which the only difficulty is the difficulty inherent in the subject. A more exhaustive treatment is unimaginable. Satire, Irony, Humour are perfectly delineated in all their grades, with a hint for each as to its true place in literature and in life. "The Satirist is a moral agent, often a social scavenger, working on a storage of bile. The Ironist is one thing or another, according to his caprice ; Irony is the humour of Satire ; it may be savage as in Swift, with a moral object, or sedate, as in Gibbon, with a malicious. . . . The stroke of the great humourist is world-wide, with lights of Tragedy in his laughter." The picture is completed by a criticism of the literature of Comedy, which, for buoyancy and brilliancy of writing, for delicacy and depth of understanding, equals the more abstract portions of the work. The inspiration of the Comic Muse herself is recognisable most clearly in passages reflecting upon some symptoms of Dullness in modern life. "If the Comic idea prevailed with us, and we had an Aristophanes to barb and wing it, we should be breathing air of Athens. Proserpines now pouring forth on us like public fountains would be cut short in the street and left blinking, dumb as pillar-posts, with letters thrust into their mouths." One thing, at least, is certain—that if the Comic idea does not prevail with us, the reason is not that we lack a leader.

The main purpose of the *Essay* is to define the spirit which Meredith considers to be the tutelary genius of civilisation ; the touchstone of worth to



which, of necessity, he has brought the characters of his novels to be tried. To his understanding, the meaning and justification of individual experience and suffering is each man's possibility of raising into full and conscious existence the God-like qualities that are latent within him. But no other writer has so fully perceived and so relentlessly expressed the immensity of the task. The main theme of his novels, and indeed of many of his poems, is the purification of rebellious and intemperate youth: a purification which to his mind can only be effected by experience in the main painful to the natural Ego; by an Ordeal which he invariably conceives as fiery. On a friend's judgment in regard to Meredith's first great novel, James Thomson wrote to him: "Neither she or any other woman, and scarcely any man, will ever forgive you the cruel, cruel ending." In this verdict on *Richard Feverel* many of Meredith's readers must at times have been tempted to agree, and certainly the only justification of being called on to watch a nature like Lucy Desborough's broken on the wheel is a reinforced conviction of the educative value of blood and tears. That this is provided by Meredith's writing in general, no student of his novels or his poems can deny. Yet at times his insight becomes so oppressed with the laboriousness of the discipline, so jealous of youth's energy expended in the mastering of mere brutishness, that from the burden he has been encouraging his fellows to undertake even his giant shoulders rebel:

Not till the fire is dying in the grate  
Look we for any kinship with the stars.  
Oh, wisdom never comes when it is gold,  
And the great price we pay for it full worth.  
We have it only when we are half earth.  
Little avails that coinage to the old.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Modern Love.*

But—and here is the connection with the Comic Spirit—it is, in some measure at least, because we neglect the help that is at hand, that our period of stumbling and unfruitfulness becomes so prolonged. For hovering above us is a mentor, offspring of man's accumulated experience, who is ready to be the individual's guardian and guide in the new epoch on which mankind is entering. Humanity's watchword henceforth is Community; and the prime test of her children's effectiveness is to be voluntary adaptation to, and co-ordination in, their environment. Or rather, it is in co-ordination that the adaptation hereafter required of them is to consist. "If you believe that our civilisation is founded in common sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex, until its features are studied. It has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like the long-bow, was once a big round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder. The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of the smile, finely tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity. Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic,

fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility, or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk—the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.”

Oh ! wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursel' as ithers see us.

Burns saw the truth and stood in need of it. Never, until by Meredith, has it been perfectly worked out. His conception is of a spirit revealing to the individual a standard of fitness and proportion in conduct, the fruit of many minds; an ideal of character, in which aspiration unrelated to action is exposed as burlesque. He sees it hovering above us continually, most apparent to the eyes of others when least visible to our own. Its object is to give the individual a vision of “reality,” a part and place in society which shall cure him of inclination to posturing and pretence. But because the Spirit is intellectual, a fruit of man’s brain, she cannot speak to him through the senses. When these are uppermost, and even temporarily have “usurped the station of their issue, mind,” only one avenue is open to her. The victim must be exposed to the ruder buffetings of his fellows, allowed to run unchecked on his course, till the antagonism by which he is surrounded awakens him to consciousness of the spectacle he presents.

Perhaps the most masterly, and certainly the easiest presentation of the thought, is in the Prelude to *The*

*Egoist.* The world, we are told, is possessed of a certain big book, so inclusive that it might almost be called the Book of Earth, in which, since writing first began, the generations of men have registered their deeds. This is the Book of Egoism. It has grown now so large as to be useless to mankind except under some form of condensation. Where shall we seek for a method of vision by which to extract wisdom from the book—"in essence, in chosen samples, digestibly?" Transcription, the realistic method, is useless, being itself already, in the main, responsible for the "malady of sameness, our modern malady." If we appeal to Science it points backward to our ancestry, and in the matter at issue we can learn little from apes. "Art is the specific. The chief consideration for us is, what particular practice of Art in letters is the best for the perusal of the Book of our common wisdom; so that with clearer minds and livelier manners we may escape, as it were, into daylight and song from a land of fog-horns. Shall we read it by the watchmaker's eye in luminous rings eruptive of the infinitesimal, or pointed with examples and types under the broad Alpine survey of the spirit born of our united social intelligence, which is the Comic Spirit?" The tale now about to be told is of an English gentleman, offspring and representative of a great House. That House, like all others, was raised to its eminence upon Egoism—a grand old Egoism that by some force of will or of character outstripped its fellows to found what we mean by a Family. But as centuries have passed and the characteristics of the rank and file of men have changed and refined, ever new and more complex forms of superiority are demanded of the representatives of such a House, if its exaltation and prominence is not to become merely fictitious. And above all it is neces-

sary that there shall be no reversion, under a modern veneer, to the old policy of brute-dominion and grab; no masquerading of a Norman baron in the guise of a gentleman of the nineteenth century. In past time the Comic Spirit was reverent of Egoism, sober, socially valuable, nationally serviceable; but now that its day is over and it lurks only in disguises and under feigned names, she hunts it mercilessly as her prey. "She watches over sentimentalism with a birch-rod," analysing much that is commonly termed love, showing it merely to be projection of self at a new angle, a seeking of the first person in the second. Sir Willoughby Patterne returns to Patterne Hall after a three-years' absence from England. His constant and adoring friend Lætitia Dale is the first of his acquaintances he meets. He springs from his carriage. "'Lætitia Dale!' he said. He panted. 'Your name is sweet English music! And are you well?' The anxious question permitted him to read deeply in her eyes. *He found the man he sought there*, squeezed him passionately, and let her go."

It must be conceded that Sir Willoughby Patterne is an extreme type of the Comic Spirit's prey; he is in fact the Egoist even among Meredith's characters. And to Meredith Egoism is what Original Sin was to our forefathers, an initial condition common to all and only to be outgrown by much prayer and fasting. In the incident of Lieutenant Patterne's visit, and in Sir Willoughby's letters from America, we see him already immersed in his egoism. Yet it is almost entirely in connection with his love affairs that the Comic Spirit's chase and exposure of him is to be displayed. For Meredith conceives of "love" as the crucial experience of his characters. Richard, Alvan Evan, Weyburn, Fleetwood, Wilfrid Pole, this is the



Ordeal of them all. The day of his captured ideal, the hour when that which hitherto has been winged and aspiring, seems stationed, held, nay even handed to his grasp in the person of his beloved, to Meredith is the test of a man's worth. Men of insight and intelligence will not normally fall into posturing or exaggeration; but this ordeal is fiery; and, undergoing it, even a Sage at times will bear "hard likeness to the toilful apes of youth." It is, he perceives, infinitely more difficult for a man to recognise the nature of his desires when he can claim that the well-being of another and dearer self is involved in their attainment. For the individual is tempted then to suppose that he can work for his friend's good, in separation from the welfare of his friends' friends and the world at large, in a way in which he has long ago learnt that it is impossible to strive for his own—if indeed he is capable of learning anything at all. Meredith sees the Devil in ambush from the moment of our incorporation of a second person in the unit of our interest. Even the dullest of us, finding himself single-handed against the world, is apt to suspect that possibly there is something amiss with his bearing; but the mock-heroic of a world well lost for love is common enough yet. There may appear something alien and almost bloodless in the restraint and consideration for others of the Whitworths, and Weyburns, and Wentworths, "the practised in self-mastery," who are Meredith's heroes; but in Willoughby's claim—"We two have an inner temple where the worship we conduct is actually an excommunication of the world. We abhor that beast to adore that divinity. This gives us our oneness, our isolation, our happiness. This is to love with the soul"—one is forced to recognise a theory that is far from uncommon, suicidal though it be.

The conviction of the crucible nature of this experience, implicit in his earliest novels, Meredith states explicitly in *The Egoist*. "The love-season," he says, "is the carnival of Egoism, and it brings the touch-stone to our natures. I speak of love, not of the mask, and not of the flutings upon the theme of love, but of the passion; a flame having, like our mortality, death in it as well as life." He makes it quite clear, moreover, that what he is disclosing of the savagery of Sir Willoughby's nature beneath the veneer of his civilisation is applicable "to thousands of civilised males." It is not only of the courtship of Clara Middleton that he is speaking when he says in relation to women, "It is the palpable and material of them still which they are tempted to flourish wherewith to invite and allay pursuit: a condition under which the spiritual, wherein their hope lies, languishes. The capaciously strong in soul among women will ultimately detect an infinite grossness in the demand for purity, infinite, spotless bloom. Earlier or later, they will see they have been victims of the singular Egoist, have worn a mask of ignorance to be named innocent, have turned themselves into market produce for his delight, and have really abandoned the commodity in ministering to the lust for it, suffered themselves to be dragged ages back in playing upon the fleshly innocence of happy accident to gratify his jealous greed of possession, when it should have been their task to set the soul above the fairest fortune, and the gift of strength in women beyond ornamental whiteness." Meredith points out in the *Essay on Comedy* that there is, and always must be, an intimate connection between the position of women and the Comic Spirit's existence and effectiveness. Comedy, as he conceives it, is less concerned with men's actions than with tendencies and

tastes that are subtle and interfused in their being. And since a true interplay upon life between men and women is only possible from a common vantage-ground of ideas, women, poorer on the whole in experience, can only raise themselves to this wider outlook by a strenuous use of their wits, and above all, by cultivation of their common sense. In swelling the ranks of the sentimentalists, woman has everything to lose and nothing to gain ; her hope is in increasing clearness of vision, fuller disentanglement of thought and sensation—

We share the primal curse :  
Together shake it off, say we.<sup>1</sup>

The essential impurity of the masculine identification of innocence and ignorance in women it has been one of Meredith's chief tasks to expose. In *The Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt*, in abstract terms, he has done it inimitably. In *The Sage Enamoured and the Honest Lady* he has fearlessly dared, and sustainedly exalted, the statement of both sides of the most intimate and intricate of human questions, in a way no other living writer could have paralleled. In this poem the Sage's ultimate position is the very antithesis of the Egoist's ; he is at one end of the scale while Willoughby is at the other ; but the subject and treatment of the theme on which they are both to discourse is similar enough in essentials to justify their interrelation. The Sage, a man of many-sided powers and interests, finds himself drawn to a woman by her graciousness and beauty, in a manner and degree that even in his hot-blooded youth he should have imagined impossible. She reciprocates the feeling sufficiently to find herself constrained to put an end to his passion. In order to do this she must tell him the story of her life. But the task is not easy. Attempting honest speech, she

<sup>1</sup> *A Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt.*

finds that a mental habit of glossing and clothing compromising facts has affected her choice of words. She wishes the truth to be conveyed, but desires her friend's image of her to remain unaffected by it. The picture she sketches is of two young and passionate lovers hurled by outraged society into a yet closer embrace, pledged more deeply to one another by the imminent danger of forced severance. They err, and in the world's eyes are ruined ; but they make their appeal to the Court of Love, and are able to esteem their gain above their loss—

invoke an advocate  
In passion's purity, thereby redeemed.

The Sage, her lover, now become her judge, remains mute and unresponsive. He envelops her in an icy silence that freezes her burning plea ; and in her bitterness she sees him as a leader of the male herd stoning the women they abase. But her words reverberate, as it were, in the emptiness, and, hearing them, she recognises their hollowness.

She no longer glosses her offence, but grasps at its ugliest, its scriptural, title. Thereupon natural repulsion in her hearer gives place to something higher and nobler—

Crimson currents ran  
From senses up to thoughts,

enabling him to realise in the valiancy of this sacrifice for his enlightenment a flower more delicate than any rosebud of guileless maidenhood, and to grasp something of the need of understanding involved in the effort necessary to such a confession.

He gave her of the deep well she had sprung ;  
And name it gratitude, the word is poor.  
But name it gratitude, is aught as rare  
From sex to sex ? And let it have survived  
Their conflict, comes the peace between the pair,  
Unknown to thousands husbanded and wived :

Unknown to Passion, generous for prey :  
Unknown to Love, too blissful in a truce.  
Their tenderest of self did each one slay ;  
His cloak of dignity, her fleur de luce ;  
Her lily flower, and his abolla cloak,  
Things living, slew they, and no artery bled.  
A moment of some sacrificial smoke  
They passed, and were the dearer for their dead.

The bulk of the poem now deals with the Sage's treatment of the issues raised by the personal situation, to the heart of which we have been introduced. And this method, call it scientific or inartistic if you will, like it or leave it, is eminently characteristic of Meredith's work. Again and again in his novels he looks over his own shoulder, as it were, to comment on his inveterate habit of proceeding from the particular to the general, and in the possibility of so doing he has seen the main claim of the particular upon our attention. His anticipation of criticism in this case takes the form of a statement in regard to the Sage's treatment of his friend :—

He passed her through the sermon's dull defile,  
and the statement in one sense is an apology. No one, he would say, deploras a tendency to dullness and sermonising on the part of his characters more deeply than their creator. But the subject under consideration appears to him too profoundly important for the discussion of it to be limited by any claims extraneous to its own. An artistic setting, a certain vitalising of the problem in particular human experience, was essential to its presentment ; but to limit it to these would be to beg the points of interest, to neglect to draw attention to the elements within it that really are obscure. Meredith's Sage, regrettably, may be dull ; but none the less his claim to the title that he bears is based on his capacity for classifying and relating the phenomena of his



life to a world that is outside itself: for passing quickly from purely personal discomfort to a vision of the truly grievous elements the tale he has heard contains. Passionate human love, a force that garnered and cherished should have been serviceable for a lifetime, by recklessness has been reduced to

These few last  
Hot quintessential drops of bryony juice,  
Squeezed out in anguish: all of that once vast!

Nevertheless he holds no brief for a hypocritical world, preserving its so-called purity at the price of gross injustice, visiting punishment for a joint deed on only one of the participators. There exist two opposing camps in this matter, but neither of them can claim to have reached a solution reconciled with the facts: one lops off a limb, a piece of life itself, the other rebels against the consequences issuing from indulgence of its instincts. By one school Nature is accounted devilish, by the other divine. But the intellectual *impasse* reached by both is the same; both

accept for doom  
The chasm between our passions and our wits.

It is the old story—Nature misread, taken as synonymous with the instincts of the flesh, separated from the idealisation of the spirit. The only solution is to recognise that man's mind and man's laws, whatever their crudity, are not alien and opposing products but are, no less than his body, outcome of Nature's chastening discipline; the one way of escape from individualistic rebellion being to conceive the collective mind of man as "child of her keen rod," his earliest laws developing as

the blind progressive worm  
That moves by touch, and thrust of linking rings,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *The World's Advance*.

his later and more complex aims demanding and necessitating a deliberate weighing of the present with the future, the immediate with the remote. Self-satisfaction, happiness, there are no more fixed centres of these than there is a finite stable compound of qualities to be termed Human Nature. Man's conception of pleasure is changing and developing with his character. And wherever he has attempted to substitute an ideal end for an immediate satisfaction, it follows that he has discerned, afar and flickering, but still discerned, the beacon of some higher joy. In a humanity thus developing, many desires fall away and are superseded. The problem raised by sexual passion is unique, because, being the channel of Life itself, its continuance is essential. The question of its ultimate place in society is insistent, and refuses to be shelved or set aside. Clearly its blind assertiveness must be checked and controlled by ideals touching the welfare of the race to be. But how and in what manner? The answer must be comprehensive, and to frame it man and woman,

the twain beside our vital flood,  
Now on opposing banks, the twain at strife

must face the problem considerably, and in unison ;

Instruct in deeper than Convenience,  
In higher than the harvest of a year.

In Meredith's hands, the Sage's power of abstract judgment betokens more, and not less, capacity for sympathy and emotion. The era he has been foreseeing, when man and woman shall meet to mate as peers, has not yet arrived. And meanwhile, in such a situation as the present, abstractly considered, a tenderness deeper than philanthropy appears to him the

step to right the loaded scales  
Displaying woman shamefully outweighed.

By his fearless treatment of the problem of sex and the long discipline needful to its solution, the Sage has released his companion from the prison-house of her isolation, put her once more into step with her fellows, taught her to hear again the heart-beat of the world. She no longer shrinks from, or slurs over, the fact of her experience ; she accepts it as the road to her awakened understanding of comradeship and of law, the groundwork of her new feeling for the tranquil and impersonal :

The peace, the homely skies, the springs that welled ;  
Love, the large love that folds the multitude.

His own reward is present too, in his quickened and deepened conception of loveliness ; the old outward attraction is still obvious, but it shrinks to insignificance before the beauty of spirit he has apprehended now :

Soul's chastity in honesty, and this  
With beauty, made the dower to men refused.  
And little do they know the prize they miss ;  
Which is their happy fortune ! Thus he mused.

The prospect open to these lovers is widely different from that of the lady's youthful desires or the Sage's preconception. Not vivid in colour, or striking in outline, it is strangely fair to view. No splendid and triumphant dawn is theirs ; only daybreak on a quiet day :

He needed her quick thirst  
For renovated earth : on earth she gazed,  
With humble aim to foot beside the wise.  
Lo, where the eyelashes of night are raised  
Yet lowly over morning's pure grey eyes.

*The Egoist* is usually considered to be the most characteristic of Meredith's utterances. Certainly it affords the best possible proof that it is natural to him to evolve his stories from an abstract rather than a dramatic foundation. At the present moment, such a method is unfashionable, and the statement may be taken as implying disparagement of his gifts as an artist.

Any such conclusion would be unjust. Many of us may prefer novels in which we are not presented at the outset with the author's thesis and preconception, favoured with the prospect of an exercise on an already enunciated problem; but, if we are open-minded, accentuation of our distaste for the method is likely in this case to end in amazement at the dramatic and imaginative power which has exalted and impassioned it. That Meredith knows all that is to be known of Comedy in the abstract, readers of the *Essay* do not need to be convinced. As a reviewer of other men's comedies he is supreme. But the qualifications necessary to a literary critic, erudition and ingenuity and balance of sympathy, belong in themselves to the "watchmaker's" equipment rather than the dramatist's, and might easily prove a burden too clogging and cumbrous for an "Alpine survey." The book is long; the story proper occupies a few days only, yet its chronicle runs to near upon five hundred pages. The dialogue is brilliant, but occasionally its brilliancy and complexity prove overwhelming. There are scenes towards the close where five or six persons, each labouring under a separate misconception, attempt to converse, and the effect on a reader, not always informed which character is speaking, is bewilderment. In the process of Willoughby's efforts to shield himself at his neighbour's expense, the ground beneath the actors is mined in every direction, and blunder is heaped upon blunder; yet the delicacy and interthreading of motive is sufficient to prevent the result from being farcical. It is less so, indeed, as the story develops, than in the earlier, more psychological part of the book, where the reader was called on to witness Willoughby's more tedious and less credible self-revelations. Certain critics have assumed that because his exposure convinces us, and is meant to convince us,

anew of our egoism, we are each called on to acclaim in Willoughby a counterpart of ourselves. To do this is to introduce a standard of realism disavowed by the author, and to miss his conception of Comedy as a "stillatory"—a condenser. The aim of the book is Comic drama in the style of Molière, exposition of a single typical character; and within these limits it must be judged. The limits are severe, and afford little or no scope for the tragic intensity of which the author of *Richard Feverel* and *Sandra Belloni* is capable—a fact of which Meredith himself is fully aware:

For this the Comic Muse exacts of creatures  
Appealing to the fount of tears; that they  
Strive never to outleap our human features  
And do right reason's ordinance obey,  
In peril of the hum to laughter nighest.  
But prove they under stress of action's fire  
Nobleness, to that test of Reason highest  
She bows; she waves them for the loftier lyre.

Nevertheless, if we turn, in so far as such division is practicable in a work that is united and organic, from the central study to the subsidiary characterisations of the book, we shall find them sufficient to have served an ordinary novelist for half a dozen novels at least. Clara, Vernon, Dr. Middleton, Crossjay, De Craye, even Lætitia herself, have a vital and developing existence. They are compelled in certain directions, of course, by the fact that they are members of the Egoist's household; but they have also a full life of their own, over and above that which is required for the exposure of Willoughby's errors. With the arrival of Dr. Middleton and his daughter at Patterne Hall, and the overt battle between the claim of Clara's pledged word to Sir Willoughby and her growing distaste for the prospect of its fulfilment, vivid characterisation may be said to begin. The imminence and inevitability of Clara's



struggle has been conveyed to us previously, chiefly through the eyes of her contemporaries. Crossjay, after his first sight of her, had run to Lætitia with news of a lady with a merry face and a liking for the navy; Vernon Whitford suggested a delicate and peculiar gift of responsiveness, while Willoughby protested slightly overmuch in regard to her youth and inexperience. Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, in insistence on the justice of her phrase, "a dainty rogue in porcelain," had given Clara's lover moments of uneasiness.

" 'Why rogue?' he asked.

'I said—in porcelain,' she replied.

'Rogue perplexes me.'

'Porcelain explains it.'

'She has the keenest sense of honour.'

'I am sure she is a paragon of rectitude.'

'She has a beautiful bearing.'

'The carriage of a young princess.'

'I find her perfect.'

'And still she may be a dainty rogue in porcelain.'

'Are you judging by the mind or the person, ma'am?'

'Both.'

'And which is which?'

'There's no distinction.'

'Rogue and mistress of Patterne do not go together.'

'Why not? She will be a novelty to our neighbourhood and an animation of the Hall.'

'To be frank, rogue does not rightly match with *me*.'

'Take her for a supplement.'

'You like her?'

'In love with her! I can imagine lifelong amusement in her company. Attend to my advice: prize the porcelain and play with the rogue.'

Sir Willoughby nodded unilluminated,"—unillumin-

ated then, because fully convinced that his decision to exalt Clara Middleton to the position of his bride was founded on the assurance of her being "essentially feminine, a parasite and a chalice"; unassisted later, from preoccupation with endeavour to instil his ideas, and correct small tendencies on the part of his betrothed to think of her mind as her own. On one side, irritation too incredulous of the possibility of revolt to acknowledge itself as uneasiness; on the other, a blind hopefulness that the man she saw and was attracted to at first must reassert himself in her lover; such is the position between Willoughby and Clara when the drama begins.

But already, in its earliest beginnings, it has had an observant spectator, and Clara is conscious of his scrutiny. Since her engagement, Willoughby's cousin and dependant, Vernon Whitford, has been on a visit to her father. He has obviously avoided being alone with her, but he has subjected her fitfully during meals to an uncomfortable, penetrating gaze. At their first meeting she had liked his eyes, but lately their look has recalled the mingled brooding and apprehension of a parent bird on the nest. After a certain conversation with Willoughby on the subject of widowhood—their last interview before the removal to Patterne—she had been conscious of actual relief in Vernon's absence and the fact of not being obliged to encounter that look. For the rest she had seen him chiefly with Crossjay, and thought that his tutorly sharpness contrasted unfavourably with Willoughby's quasi-paternal indulgence. But her judgment on this subject is to be modified by learning incidentally from Crossjay, almost immediately on her arrival at Patterne, that Vernon Whitford pays for, as well as teaches, him; and by Vernon's manifest anxiety to get the lad away

from the place before he is spoiled. At Patterne it is inevitable that Vernon should sometimes be thrown in her path. He is merely a scholarly adjunct of the household, liable at any moment to be called on to act as Clara's retainer in Willoughby's absence. And with him she feels no need for restraint; he is devoid of graces, an execrable dancer, and an indifferent horseman. As a writer of letters to the Press he is useful to Willoughby, and his eminence as a scholar and controversialist adds a distinction to Patterne parallel in kind to its reputation for Parisian cooking. He goes on his way without the smallest pretension, and Clara notes, half regretfully, that he never dissents strongly from Sir Willoughby in speech. If it had been possible for her to see him with the eyes of a reader familiar with Meredith's other creations, she might, from the outset, have been more fully aware of Vernon's significance. For she learns, in their first interview, that he has been walking off irritation with Crossjay, and has been nine and a half hours on foot; and she surprises him, at their second, asleep beneath the double-blossom wild cherry, to which Willoughby has previously half-mockingly alluded as "Vernon's holy tree." "She had a curiosity to know the title of the book he would read beneath those boughs, and, grasping Crossjay's hand fast, she craned her neck, as one timorous of a fall in peeping over chasms, for a glimpse of the page; but immediately, and still with a bent head, she turned her face to where the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer-cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem like higher Alpine snows in noon sunlight, a flush of white. From deep to deeper heavens of white her eyes perched and soared. Wonder lived in her. Happiness

in the beauty of the tree pressed to supplant it, and was more mortal and narrower. Reflection came, contracting her vision and weighing her to earth. Her reflection was: 'He must be good who loves to lie and sleep beneath the branches of this tree!' Clara would rather have clung to her first impression: wonder so divine, so unbounded, was like soaring into homes of angel-crowded space."

She, the wild white cherry, a tree,  
Earth-rooted, tangibly wood,  
Yet a presence throbbing, alive,<sup>1</sup>

gleams elsewhere in Meredith's writing with more than mortal beauty as banner and beacon of the highest. And she is Vernon's guardian angel now; for Rabesquarat, Queen of Illusions, is at hand. Half-dozing, he has seen Clara's head above him, framed in dazzling whiteness; and he is tempted to dwell on the vision, after it has disappeared, as being of spiritual significance, instead of what his wakened wits declare it, the mere outcome of a young lady's inquisitiveness. The sharp struggle that ensues gives scope for subtle analysis, in which Meredith reveals certain characteristics of men he believes to be earth's foremost. Of the cherishing and dallying with any such fancy as that which Vernon dismisses, he says: "Just outside reality, it illumines, enriches, and softens real things; and to desire it in preference to the simple fact, is a damning proof of enervation. Such was Vernon's winding up of his brief drama of fantasy. He was aware of the fantastical element in him and soon had it under. Which of us who is of any worth is without it? He had not much vanity to trouble him, and passion was quiet, so his task was not gigantic. Especially be it remarked, that he was a man of quick pace, the sovereign remedy for the

<sup>1</sup> *A Faith on Trial.*

dispersing of mental fen-mist. He had tried it, and knew that nonsense is to be walked off." After this the reader may desire to be told of Vernon's part in the unfolding of Clara Middleton's romance; but of his bearing and influence in life he will not need to be informed.

It has been said of Dr. Middleton that he belongs to the families of *Crotchet Castle* and *Gryll Grange*. The dedication of his earliest volume of poems bears witness to Meredith's reverence and admiration for his father-in-law; and to Peacock's influence on Meredith's work we have the testimony of no less astute a critic than James Thomson. Yet, though a relationship certainly exists, it is collateral rather than in the direct line of descent. Dr. Middleton unites with Dr. Folliott in his respect for the classics, and his esteem for good cooking. Their not very consistent ideas of women's nature and education, if we allow for certain modifications of custom, are also almost identical. The sentence in which Folliott solves the question whether ladies shall be excluded from his resuscitated Athenian theatre among the number of citizens disgraced by their ignorance of Greek, for style and sentiment is worthy of Dr. Middleton himself: "Every man may take in a lady, and she who can construe and metricise a chorus, shall, if she so please, pass in by herself." But though the men and manners of Patterne have lost in robustness, compared with those of Crotchet, they have developed in other directions, and on Meredith's theory that women are what their menkind make of them, the substitution of Mrs. Mountstuart, and Lætitia, and Clara, for Mrs. Folliott, Miss Crotchet, and Miss Clarinda, is no mean testimony to growing masculine enlightenment. Moreover, Dr. Middleton is best and most convincing where the issues under consideration are subtlest. The incident



of "An Aged and a Great Wine" is delightful farce, but it does not compete in characterisation with the Doctor's criticism of Willoughby's snappishness to De Craye on their way to the party at Mrs. Mountstuart's, or his dialogue with the ladies Eleanor and Isabel, and Lætitia's father. It is on a lower plane too than his delicacy in relation to Vernon and their most excellent fooling, "In Assignation's name he assignats." Sympathising as he probably would with Folliott's manner of correcting Eavesdrop's unmannerliness, Dr. Middleton, nevertheless, relegates such rough and ready methods to the service of Crossjay and his comrades, and excels in the subtler means of rebuke he commands for his peers.

Horace De Craye is the most delightful of Meredith's Irishmen. As soon as his baggage comes in sight, a breeze begins to stir the rarefied atmosphere at Patterne, and the promise of refreshment is not belied on his arrival. Accident has favoured him with an introduction to Clara, and she has already acknowledged his charm; for their acquaintance has quickened to intimacy within the space of an hour, and Lætitia Dale has been scandalised by the changed aspect of one who, so shortly before, appeared to be overwhelmed with despair. "Clara bathed in mirth: a boy in a summer stream shows not heartier refreshment of his whole being." She is quickly to realise that De Craye is not the sustaining strong man of her dreams, ideal for anchorage—that he is, in fact, but "a holiday character." But, out-wearied as she is by iterations of deaf misunderstanding, she is ready to estimate highly a gift for responsiveness and accordant chiming: over-highly, perhaps; yet there is a delicacy and elasticity in De Craye's sympathy with her changes of mood not easy to over-estimate. His instinctive actions for sparing

her pain are almost invariably right. He can understand and appreciate her directness in formulating the nature of her influence over Crossjay, and realise that her accent on the word "marriage," within a few weeks of her own, betokens some more abstract desire than an exchange of lovers. And all this in spite of the fact that he professes small faith in disinterestedness. His gay tactfulness is delightful in contrast with Willoughby's stiffness, and also to some extent in relation with Vernon Whitford's seriousness. For, though there can be no question that in Whitford, and Redworth, and Weyburn, Meredith draws his ideal type, he keeps a warm place in his heart for worldlings wanting in the rectitude and steadfastness of his heroes, if only they possess a keen sense of fitness and social obligation in matters of detail. They may not be of the Kingdom exactly, but they are secured, at any rate, from his Outer Darkness by the fact that their intelligence is habitually playing and responding over an area of feelings and interests unrelated to their own. They may not be great; but the windows of what souls they possess stand open to life and its lessons.

Clara is without Meredith's prime virtue of courage; she wavers and vacillates till what is little more than a fortunate accident puts her on to the right track. She belongs to Cecilia's family; but she is capable of robuster growth—not so much of developing strength of her own, as of learning to recognise her weakness and desire its corrective. She longs to be rescued from Willoughby; yet she is not represented as accepting the "spiritual lift out of circumstances" his first rival offers her. We are given to understand that her allegiance to Vernon comes of her recognition that she is at fault in character as well as circumstance, and that his guidance and control are her true means of development. She

achieves the self-knowledge and humility which for Meredith are the groundwork of aspiration ; and her misdemeanours are pardoned. Certainly no member of the opposite sex would have been granted quite so ready an escape. The reader's attention would have been called to the fact that flight from one form of dependence to another is but postponement of conflict. We light here on an inconsistency in our author, at which we may be pardoned for smiling. In relation to women, Meredith's chivalry is allowed to override the relentlessness of his logic. Women, he says, are the creations of men ; they are hardly accountable for weakness and cowardice induced by their master's demands. The marvel is that they show any spirit at all. Vacillating desires for freedom and righteousness are the most a fair-minded masculine critic finds himself able to demand of them, and these are sufficient ; for they are an earnest of that which one day is to be. Clara, in her resistance of Willoughby and De Craye, and her appreciation of Vernon, has shown some courage and considerable insight. She has shown all that can be expected of her, and her creator forbears to read his severer homiletic. He gives her into the hands of a man who possesses the perception and sympathy that she needs, and will not dream of sentimental questionings as to the superior weight of his judgments and finality of his decisions.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE TRAGIC COMEDIANS

THE difficulty of deciding as to the relative merits of Meredith's novels is largely due to the extraordinarily wide range of his sympathies, and to the fact that he seldom explores the same region twice over. Many, perhaps most, of his stories have a foundation in actual events, though these events are adapted to purposes of his own. In *The Tragic Comedians*<sup>1</sup> he has taken a theme, the incidents of which are themselves so notorious that he is confined to "the bare railway line of the story." The story is that of Ferdinand Lassalle and Helene von Dönniges; nothing, Meredith says, has been added to it, nothing invented. Nor does this literalness apply merely to the incidents; an account of the episode written in after life by the heroine of it<sup>2</sup> is the source of most of the dialogue. The title of the book, *The Tragic Comedians*, might in itself provide subject-matter for an essay. The characters of few men, says Meredith, are of "a stature and a complexity calling for the junction of the two Muses to name them"; the character of Ferdinand Lasalle, known in the story as Sigismund Alvan, is of this stature. Yet, in one direction, his acts are "lively ludicrous," and he meets a lurid end. He is of the *tragic* comedians, those men whose histories reveal some huge

<sup>1</sup> Published in the *Fortnightly Review*, October, 1880, to February, 1881.

<sup>2</sup> *Meine Beziehungen zu Ferdinand Lasalle*, by Frau von Racowitza.

discrepancy between their powers and their fortunes—the which, if it be not interrogated, “to distinguish where character strikes the note of discord with life,” will make Nature appear a harridan and man the plaything of circumstance. The prologue—one of Meredith’s most brilliant bits of writing—opens with a discussion of the much-abused word “fantastical,” and a declaration of its fitness to “that wandering ship of the drunken pilot, the mutinous crew, and the angry captain, called Human Nature.” Alvan and his lady “will pass under this word as under their banner and motto. Their acts are incredible; they . . . drove their bark in a manner to eclipse historical couples upon our planet. . . . The last chapter of them is written in red blood, and the man pouring out that last chapter was of a mighty nature, not unheroical, a man of the active, grappling, modern brain, which wrestles with facts to keep the world alive, and can create them to set it spinning. A Faust-like legend might spring from him; he had a devil. He was the leader of a host, the hope of a party, venerated by his followers, well hated by his enemies, respected by the intellectual chiefs of his time, in the pride of his manhood and his labours when he fell. And why this man should have come to his end through love, and the woman who loved him have laid her hand in the hand of the slayer, is the problem we have to study, nothing inventing, in the spirit and flesh of both.”

Clotilde von Rüdiger (Helene von Dönniges) is a member of the smaller German aristocracy, by which Sigismund Alvan is abhorred as a demagogue and a Jew. But the period (1862–4) is “revolutionary in society by reflection of the state of politics,” and Clotilde is renowned as the most original of her set. Young as she is, her reputation for brilliancy is great in



all the circles she touches, whether in Germany, Italy, or the French Riviera. But her flights of daring are almost wholly confined to intellectual regions, and her family—consisting of father, a gouty general; mother, a faded beauty; and negligible sisters—willingly ministers to her self-esteem. Her reading, Meredith tells us, is “an interfusion of philosophy skimmed, and realistic romances deep-sounded,” but she belongs to a country where literature is seriously esteemed and widely appreciated, where there is a real traffic in ideas. Her talk of Plutarch and “Pompeius” with her partner at the ball in Berlin is perfectly genuine, though it would be difficult to imagine an Englishwoman indulging in it. And this fact of her intellectual attainment needs to be borne strenuously in mind, because, except in the scenes where he shows her with Alvan, Meredith is guilty of a prejudice in his treatment of Clotilde, an over-analysis of motive, which almost obscures her positive qualities. It is, of course, part of his purpose to show her strong in Alvan’s presence, weak when she is alone; and history is with him here. But there is the further fact to be reckoned with that, long before they have met, Alvan hears of her as his match, and afterwards, in spite of the clearest vision of her failings, feels her consistently a prize worth winning. Meredith’s attitude to Clotilde is the reverse of his ordinary attitude to women, the magnanimous attitude just spoken of in reference to Clara, and in reference to Diana still more marked. Clotilde has far more forcible opposition to contend with, yet little or nothing is allowed to her fears; she is labelled a craven at almost her first signs of instability. The reason is not far to seek. Meredith is in love with Alvan exactly as he is in love with Diana. He sees in them both, or attributes to them, a power of passion that raises them high above their fellows, and

he scorns those who, having been in presence of this power, fail to cling to it as divine. Diana's lover is required to recognise it as covering an offence against the deepest mutual interest of their lives; Alvan's girlish bride-elect, fortified by her memory of it, must turn from bewilderment at the inconsistency of her lover's actions, and immediately develop a power he knows her not to possess, by which to surmount the brutal opposition of her parents. Is not this, combined with their author's continued insistence on the relative inferiority of Dacier and Clotilde, something very like special pleading? No one could lay more emphasis than Meredith has elsewhere laid on the fact that it is the task of love worthy the name to translate itself into considerate and imaginative action; moreover, he has written a poem entitled *The Burden of Strength*. In *The Egoist* and in *Diana of the Crossways*, Meredith is in love with his heroines and despises their lovers; here he is in love with Alvan and Alvan alone, and his antagonism to Clotilde has been increased by her attempt at self-justification. The characters are of course historical, and it is not intended to suggest there can be any doubt which was the greater of nature; yet Meredith's tribute to Lasalle would have been higher, if he had abstained from pressing the points so severely against the woman of his choice. We may remark that, although Helene's conduct is not justified either by her own or any other version of the story, these agree in laying more stress than Meredith does on Lasalle's earlier relations with women, on the treachery of his friends, and on the degree of Helene's physical collapse under her father's brutality.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There are numerous German authorities on the subject, but a fair summary of the case is given in English in *Ferdinand Lasalle and Helene von Dönniges; A Modern Tragedy*, by Elizabeth E. Evans.

Except, however, for the interests of historical justice, what Meredith has left undone in *The Tragic Comedians* is not of much moment ; what he has done is so great. It is among the best of his novels ; the theme calls for that poetic treatment in which he is most himself. The characters and incidents ready to his hand were vivid ; his task was to provide the atmosphere in which they moved. And in this he has succeeded to perfection in his drawing of Alvan ; “ Behind the veil of our human conventions,” says Alvan to Clotilde, “ power is constant as ever, and to perceive the fact is to have the divining-rod—to walk clear of shams. . . . It is the soul that does things in this life, the rest is vapour ” ; and Meredith has made us realise him as one whose grasp on life and reality compelled submission. Of his place in European politics little is said. But the facts are part of his background, only subdued, that the man himself may be seen greater than anything he has done. He appears first in the fourth chapter of the book, a scene which sets the pace for the whole story, and it is the pace that kills. Alvan and Clotilde have been matter of surmise to one another for a year ; at last they are in the same room, in Berlin. Clotilde introduces herself with a contradiction as to the character of Hamlet, elsewhere quoted. Alvan shakes off his masculine companions as other men might shake off a fly. In the midst of a crowd they are alone. “ ‘ Hamlet in due season,’ ” said he. . . . ‘ I shall convince you.’ She shook her head. ‘ Yes, yes ; an opinion formed by a woman is inflexible ; I know that : the fact is not half so stubborn. But at present there are two more important actors ; we are not at Elsinore. You are aware that I hoped to meet you ? ’ ‘ Is there a periodical advertisement of your hopes ?—or do they come by intuition ? ’ ‘ Kollin was right ! The

ways of the serpent will be serpentine. I knew we must meet. It is no true day so long as the goddess of the morning and the sun-god are kept asunder. I speak of myself, by what I have felt since I heard of you.' 'You are sure of your divinity?' 'Through my belief in yours!' They bowed smiling at the courtly exchanges. 'And tell me,' said he, 'as to meeting me? . . .' She replied: 'When we are so like the rest of the world, we may confess our weakness.' 'Unlike! for the world and I meet and part: not we two.' Clotilde attempted an answer: it would not come. She tried to be revolted by his lording tone, and found it strangely inoffensive. His lording presence and the smile that was like a waving feather on it compelled her so strongly to submit to hear, as to put her in danger of appearing to embrace this man's rapid advances. She said: 'I first heard of you at Capri. And I was at Capri seven days after you had left.' 'You knew my name *then*?' 'Be not too curious with necromancers. Here is the date, March 15th. You departed on the 8th.' 'I think I did. That is a year from now.' 'Then we missed: now we meet. It is a year lost. A year is a great age! Reflect on it and what you owe me. How I wished for a comrade at Capri! Not a "young lady," and certainly no man. The understanding Feminine was my desire—a different thing from the feminine understanding, usually. I wanted my comrade young and fair, necessarily of your sex, but with heart and brain; an insane request I fancied, until I heard that you were the person I wanted. In default of you I paraded the island with Tiberius, who is my favourite tyrant.'" He describes the passages between him and Tiberius, who, at his suggestion, attacks the patricians, while a plebeian demagogue chronicles the struggle in which he, Alvan, is destined to fall. Clotilde enters

into the extravagance and comments, "You died bravely?" He replies that bodily death by that sapphire sea and under that sapphire sky was easier to meet than the second death of missing, by so few days, a gold-haired Lucretia. He questions her abruptly: "Tell me frankly—the music in Italy?" "Amorous and martial, brainless and monotonous." "Excellent!" his eyes flashed delightedly, "O comrade of comrades! that year lost to me will count heavily as I learn to value those I have gained. Yes, brainless! There, in music, we beat them, as politically France beats us. No life without brain! The brainless in Art and in Statecraft are nothing but a little more obstructive than the dead. It is less easy to cut a way through them. But it must be done, or the Philistine will be as the locust in his increase, and devour the green blades of the earth. You have been trained to shudder at the demagogue? 'I do not shudder,' said Clotilde."

Much of the skill of the scene lies in its interthreading of the near and the far, its mingling of abstract and personal. The "you and I" of ordinary lovers would have been ludicrously inadequate here; yet an overweight of intellect would have injured the effect of intensity, which is the keynote of the whole. Alvan, pouring forth his thoughts, checks himself at the close of one of his outbursts with the remark: "'You leave it to me to talk.' 'Could I do better?' 'You listen sweetly.' 'It is because I like to hear.' 'You have the pearly little ear of a shell on the sand.' 'With the great sea sounding near it.'" Alvan drew closer to her. "'I look into your eyes and perceive that one may listen to you and speak to you. Heart to heart, then! Yes, a sea to lull you, a sea to win you—temperately, let us hope; by storm, if need be. My prize is found!'" The giant, who



heretofore has conquered all hearts, his own untouched, trembles in the hands of this girl—his “golden-crested serpent,” his “red fox,” his “shining-haired Lucretia.” Their skimming discussions are “like swallow-flights from the nest beneath the eaves to the surface of the stream.” Their talk is of Heine, with whom Alvan has lived; of politics, of Paris, of Italy, of wine, and of Shakespeare; and last, but not least, of Alvan himself. He vivifies all that he touches. “There was a bell in everything for him; Nature gave out her cry and significance was on all sides of the universe. . . . Where Clotilde had really thought, instead of flippantly tapping at the doors of thought, or crying vagrantly for an echo, his firm footing in the region thrilled her; and where she had felt deeper than fancifully, his wise tenderness overwhelmed.”

The surrounding guests realise that the love god is at work among them—a presence irresistible. Alvan’s love affairs are caught up to the plane of his politics. His love is volcanic, and the sun and moon and stars are pressed into its service. The hours race onward to the morning: Alvan will conduct Clotilde to her home. “He laughed to hear her say, in answer to a question as to her present feelings: ‘I feel that I am carried away by a centaur!’ The comparison had been used to him before.” Their eclipse is afar, but it is as if a shadow crept to the edge of their sun. “‘No,’ said he, responding to a host of memories to shake them off, ‘no more of the quadruped man!’ You tempt him, may I tell you that? Why now, this moment, at the snap of my fingers, what is to hinder our taking the short cut to happiness, centaur and nymph? One leap and a gallop, and we should be into the morning, leaving night to grope for us, parents and friends to run about for the wits they lose in running.

But no! no more scandals. That silver moon invites us by its very spell of bright serenity to be mad; just as when you drink of a reverie, the more prolonged it is, the greater the readiness for wild delirium at the end of the draught. But no!' his voice deepened—'the handsome face of the orb that lights us would be well enough were it only a gallop between us two. Dearest, the orb that lights us two for a lifetime must be taken all round, and I have been on the wrong side of the moon: I have seen the other face of it—a visage scored with regrets, dead dreams, burnt passions, bald illusions, and the like, the like!—sunless, waterless, without a flower! It is the old volcano land: it grows one bitter herb: if ever you see my mouth distorted, you will know I am revolving a taste of it; and as I need the antidote you give, I will not be the centaur to win you, for that is the land where he stables himself; yes, there he ends his course, and that is the herb he finishes by pasturing on.'"

No determination could, we feel, be wiser or more finely expressed, yet it brings us in sight of the rock on which these two are to founder. Alvan, irresistible while he holds straight on his course, sacrifices his single-mindedness in the desire to win social advantages over and above his bride. Accredited good citizenship becomes his ambition for the first time in his life. He is deeply in love with Clotilde; but he desires increasingly to have, with her, a wife and a marriage unexceptionable in the eyes of the world. In the effort to compass his desire he comes to his death, and the world mourns at his tomb. He is killed in a duel, and much of the fault, Meredith would say most of it, is Clotilde's. Yet so godlike a figure is he, that to have been claimed for his mate makes her immortal. And, after all, we may consent to let "the woman," "poor Clotilde," serve as his scapegoat; for has not Meredith himself, in another

context, detected and exposed identically the same error as Alvan's, where of Beauchamp with Renée he says: "He committed the capital fault of treating her as his equal in passion and courage, not as metal ready to run into the mould under temporary stress of fire"?

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE POEMS—"THE JOY OF EARTH"

WE usually conceive of poetry as a power whose essential function is to release the mind from the tyranny of fact and transport it into a new world, in which, earth-bound no longer, it rises freely on the wings of aspiration, and finds, in dream, a haven of forgetfulness far from the harsh realities of the waking world. According to this conception, part of the value of poetry is that it creates a dissatisfaction with common life; it is the revelation of the things that are not, those things for which the Soul searches in vain this narrow prison-house of mortality, where is no place for the happiness for which she longs:

Ah Love! could you and I with Him conspire  
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,  
Would we not shatter it to bits, and then  
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire?

The idea is noble; and it is true that not a little of the greatest poetry derives its power from a refusal to accept the established order with mean complacency merely because it is established, from a determination to assert the soul's highest claims whether there be anything in the world to answer them or no,—a defiance of all mechanical limitation, a sublime assertion of the inexhaustible self-sufficiency of spiritual riches. It is a noble conception, but a conception fraught with danger.

For however poor, however unsatisfying, a thing life in its common conditions may appear to be, it is with these conditions that all men for all time are primarily concerned. And to revolt against them, to turn the mind away from them to a supposed more perfect world of its own devising, serves only to bring out in them more clearly the qualities against which revolt is made, and to increase, by contrast, the illusion of their barrenness. In other words, the very essence and spirit of poetry—its passionately exalted temper—tend to give it a disintegrating, one might almost say a demoralising, influence. For it divides experience into two halves and, by the very fact of the division, introduces an element of unreality into both. Aspiration is indeed an infinite thing, and the goal of desire is never reached ; but in much high poetry, this infinitude, this insatiability of the soul (being made, as it were, a focus for thought, instead of an assumption), is so treated as to appear for what it is not, namely as a reaching out after things whose very nature is to be unreachable, a concentration of desire not upon an end conceived as constantly developing, but upon endlessness itself:—

The Desire of the Moth for the Star.

Much high poetry is certainly involved in this error, an error arising from a fallacy in transcendental thinking, very plain when pointed out. But there is a still greater bulk of poetry which, not based itself upon so insecure a foundation, yet tends to set up in the mind of all but the most philosophic readers an error at least analogous ; the man who views life poetically is for them the man who ignores what are for the mass of his fellows the only recognisable facts of life, and devotes all his attention to certain shadowy appearances, seldom apparent to any but himself, and in any



case, when detached, as he is wont to detach them, from the solid fabric of life itself, insignificant and unreal. Poetry comes in this way to be supposed too tender, too fragile, a thing to bear the rough and tumble of a working world, in which men speak with firmness and with candour, meaning what they say. There is the tendency to treat it, much as men treat women, as if it were something too delicate to breathe the air of truth, in whose presence the mind deferentially draws down a protective veil against the inroad of reality and prepares to be amused and edified by exquisite impossibilities. This is an insolent attitude, fatal to the dignity of both parties concerned in it. Far worthier is the action of those, who, believing that they can trace in poetry the attempt to set up a fraudulent relation, to baffle and to subdue the intellect, treat it as an altogether negligible part of life. They dignify it—with the candour of their contempt; they show that at least they expected from it a genuine and manly utterance, and, finding themselves disappointed, will take for substitute no sop, however sweet.

Naturally a great poet—a man in whom the spirit of poetry is predominant—cannot be expected to take cognisance of misapprehension or misinterpretation of either kind. His vision is not a matter that he is the least interested to defend or to discuss. He has an inward conviction of truth as it is revealed to him, and is concerned with nothing but its expression. But one who is only secondarily a poet, primarily a moralist and a thinker, but who, as a thinker, recognises that to misconceive of poetry or banish it from the mind is to cripple thought itself and take from life its noblest medium of expression, such an one, even in his poetical work, will keep the continuity of life with poetry perpetually in view. He will be strenuously alert against

offering the least temptation to any reader to treat the enjoyment of poetry as a mere indulgence of the mind. He will wish to show that poetry is poetry not by virtue of vagueness or as a thing removed, fostering or ministering to emotions to which life makes no response, but because, with an accuracy as perfect for its purpose as that of science itself, it looks upon the whole of life and sees its various parts in their true proportion.

Though a rich vein of poetic imagery appears in everything he writes, Meredith cannot be called primarily a poet; for through almost all his poetic work there runs a purpose, to the writer's apprehension more vital than the perfection of the work itself. This work, he would say, taken as pure poetry, may or may not be unimpeachable; but there is one impeachment which it shall never have to bear. No one shall say of it that it denies the facts of life or exists merely as a misty phantom afloat upon the breeze; its foundations at least shall be secure, it shall be rooted in the solid ground. Thence rising, if but fitfully, into the upper air, it shall exercise, not a disintegrating, but a reconciling influence upon life and thought; it shall give beauty and fruitfulness to what at first seemed common, by showing it an essential part of a larger plan, a wider unity, in which each element is necessary to all the rest and the distinction between low and high vanishes and is forgotten. For the worth and dignity of the so-called higher members belongs to them, not in their own right, but as the outcome of a true relation to the so-called lower members, both lower and higher being equally in their degree the expression of the principle or spirit of life that pervades the whole. And poetry, the recognition of that pervading principle, the expression of the spirit animating high and low alike, far from denying fact, shall be shown the only means by

which the ultimate and eternal fact can find statement at all.

This continuity, this immanence of the spirit in every part, is indeed the main theme of all Meredith's poetry. According to his conception, poetry consists, not in the creation of a new world, but in the recognition of the true nature of the world that is, seen from the most comprehensive, the most exalted standpoint. In every piece the same attitude is taken up, and, in many, forms the main part of the poetic material. And to those familiar with his writing he sums the whole in a single word—a word which he chooses because of its utter familiarity, because in common life it stands for the tangible, the prosaic, the commonplace, but into which he infuses the breath and finer spirit of all his knowledge, and takes for the only limit of a limitless aspiration—the word “Earth.” To understand this word as Meredith understands it is to possess a key to the most secret chambers of his mind; to think of Earth and feel towards Earth as he does is to be heir to the new inheritance conferred by his poetry upon human life and thought.

Not solitarily in fields we find  
Earth's secret open, though one page is there ;  
Her plainest, such as children spell, and share  
With bird and beast ; raised letters for the blind.  
Not where the troubled passions toss the mind,  
In turbid cities, can the key be bare.  
It hangs for those who hither thither fare,  
Close interthreading nature with our kind.  
They, hearing History speak of what men were  
And have become, are wise. The gain is great  
In vision and solidity ; it lives.  
Yet at a thought of life apart from her,  
Solidity and vision lose their state ;  
For Earth, that gives the milk, the spirit gives.<sup>1</sup>

The book of Nature is but one page of the book of Earth, a page itself inexhaustible, as all her pages

<sup>1</sup> *Earth's Secret.*

are, but easy reading when compared with those that follow it. The conception of Earth starts at a far humbler level than that of Nature and, as in the parable of the banquet, hears continually the call, "Friend, come up higher," to enter at last into the place prepared for the master of the revels, to become the presiding genius at the feast. Stoop down and gather up the grains of dust trodden beneath your feet ; here already you have Earth ; here you have something which forms at once the foundation and the crown of life.

For he who the reckoning sums  
Finds nought in his hand save Earth.  
Of Earth are we, stripped or crowned.<sup>1</sup>

Or consider that infinite, starry universe which, with the moral sense in man, remained the mystery of mysteries to the great mind of Kant. Here also, in this sublimest pageant, is a revelation of the same spirit, the same order, that animates the dust. And this spirit, this order, man recognises even among the stars, because he is himself its child.

The fire is in them whereof we are born ;  
The music of their motion may be ours.<sup>2</sup>

Conceiving thus of himself and of the stars above him, he sees Earth with new eyes.

A wonder edges the familiar face : . . .  
Half strange seems Earth, and sweeter than her flowers.

The dust can never again be mere dust to him, because, entering into it, proceeding from it, he has perceived the Law which in himself he knows as Reason, the Life which in himself he feels as Love. And he has perceived these things, not as properties of a higher life grafted upon a lower—they have not come to him as

<sup>1</sup> *A Faith on Trial.*

<sup>2</sup> *Meditation under Stars.*

messengers from some ethereal region to which he looks himself to be translated one happier day,—he has perceived them to be the foundation, the essence of Life as he actually lives it, equally manifested in the conditions to which his life responds and in the active principle which responds to those conditions and transforms them. From this perception is born the love of Earth.

It will have been observed already that the entire range of human nature is included by Meredith in the Earth conception ; as he himself says of it :—

Earth was not Earth, before her sons appeared.<sup>1</sup>

Man is a part of Earth, and neither Earth nor Man are rightly understood till seen in true relation one to another. The outlines of that relation are indicated by Meredith in one of his noblest poems—a poem sculpturesque in style, magnificent in the scale and proportion of the shaping thought, its contour cut with the terseness and finality proper to great work in stone, “a monument more durable than brass.” It would be hard to find a better means to suggest the range of the Earth conception, than by unravelling the more important of the ideas expressed in this great ode.

On her great venture, Man,  
Earth gazes, while her fingers dint the breast  
Which is his well of strength, his home of rest,  
And fair to scan.

Demeter, the eternal Mother, watches and wonders at her child ; for motherly embrace she gives him the fields, the woods, the hills, the valleys, with their beauty and their shelter ; for milk, the riches of her harvest. She can do no more ; his strength he drew from her ; time alone can show how he will use it. Use it he must, for strife is the watchword of his being ; his

<sup>1</sup> *Appreciation.*



life is to be a battle and, if he shirks the fight, that force, which she has given him for mastery of his foe, will turn upon its possessor to destroy him. But already the battle is for something more than meat; his eye goes deeper than the surface; voices from the heart of his Mother sound upon his ear; and a new spirit animates the fray. His desires still drive him on; but he is more anxious to satisfy than to understand them; and he retards his advance by a cumbrous machinery that obscures the end for which he planned it. Caught in his own toils, he pictures life itself as a mere snare; his nature, his origin, his destiny baffle him, and his perplexity becomes a lurid mask hiding from him the serenity of his Mother's face. Like a child upon the breast, dissatisfied, he appeals fretfully he knows not to what, because his Mother will not give him what he may not have. He had supposed she existed to gratify his whims and, finding it not so, he is afraid, and turns from her as from a phantom mocking him; or again, in revulsion of feeling, endows her with the shallow beauty of the dream-enchantress, only to see it wither before his waking eyes. It was the same in the old days when he worshipped her as a god. No offering made her less terrible in exacting the uttermost fulfilment of her law. She punishes and yet she fascinates, and he is for ever striving to fathom the mystery of her attraction; and his failure to fathom it he takes for another mystery: though the last has a simple solution,—that his wits are still too weak. Meantime the relentless rule goes on:—

He may entreat, aspire,  
 He may despair, and she has never heed.  
 She, drinking his warm sweat, will soothe his need,  
 Not his desire.

He finds his impulse to happiness met, from very childhood, by the menace of the tomb, and he wonders that

he is not himself Earth's chosen, and that she has given the better place to better men! to men who have the endowment she requires, who, by choice or instinct, live nearest to her law. And though it is his gradual approximation to Earth's law which has lifted Man above the brute and already made him a being whose life, in part at least, is ruled by thought, yet the wisdom and virtue of this law is darkened in him by the perverting, cramping tyranny of Self. Tied to his own sensations, clinging to every prospect of indulgence, recoiling from a world which seems to put a term to his enjoyment and to him, he robs his life at once of all its dignity and all its purpose.

Behold his wormy home !  
And he the wind-whipped anywhither wave,  
Crazily tumbled on a shingle-grave  
To waste in foam.

The very pathos of such an end revolts him ; it cannot be. This stern rule is a delusion ; he can evade it, he can rise above it. What he sees is so mysterious, so baffling, he will fortify himself against it with the greater mystery of what he cannot see. The power that made Nature meant to make something else : he is certain of it : he has faith : or if not faith, this miracle, that denies Nature, shall give him a conviction just as good. His life is more precious than it seems, it is as precious as he himself would have it be. "Take me from Earth," he prays, "dear Lord, take *ME*." He disowns his Mother, but she does not disown her son. Without him, half her faculty must have remained blind, unfruitful, and her beauty without a flower. Take man's achievements from her, rob her of order and of decency, of art and language, thought and love, and Earth were barren indeed. Therefore, even while he disowns her, she listens to his words with pride, grieving only for the

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blindness which parts him from her and is the cause of grief in him. For this clamorous appeal of his to the Above is but an outpouring of the life he drew from Earth under his feet, and all his aspirations are hers. Sin and the shadow of Death she hates not less than he does,

And her desires are those  
For happiness, for lastingness, for light.  
'Tis she who kindles in his haunting night  
The hoped dawn-rose.

The gleam, the aspiration, the ideal that beckons him, are from the throbbing of her pulse, and this is their true interpretation—that the life he is now living, the Earth on which now he stands, are the life of the Spirit and the Spirit's abode: that Spiritual Order, which he prays for and pictures to himself as far away, closes him in already upon every side; heaven lies about him, only that he is in his infancy, and that the eyes of the mind are locked and he cannot rend the veil aside and see. One day he will open them, and that is the day on which his Mother's heart is set. The veil of Self will wither under a fiery ordeal, and of the fire shall be born light and vision. The divine life will reveal itself, the mist that obscured it will be rolled away: he will see Earth irradiated in heavenly brightness, and learn, like her, to live, not for himself, but for his kind, for the generations yet to be. Thus will he bring the future life into the present, and found it upon a rock. He will better understand those tales of angel and of devil, heaven and hell; he will gain a new idea of faith. Because he rejoices in what is, he will be able to trust what is to come. But until this day has dawned, until the earthly life and the spiritual life are one, until towards the goal to which his Mother calls him he strives with all the powers she gave, he has not entered into his inheritance, he

cannot truly be called her child. Meantime she watches, wonders: his destiny waits to be decided, and not his alone but hers; the generations of men pass like autumn leaves: her hope is in humanity, in the spring and the virtue of the tree

To conclude this chapter, a word must be added in connection with an idea presupposed in the idea of Earth. It will have been observed that a considerable part of *Earth and Man* is devoted to the exposure of a fallacy, which Meredith regards as very grievous, inherent in the common understanding of religion and its relation to the rest of life. Religion, as the thoughtless, and even as some thoughtful persons, profess it, is apt to be taken, as it were, for a home or refuge, to which those whom Earth's discipline has wearied, may flee for consolation. The disobedient child defies the schoolmaster if, in the last resort, he can find shelter under his mother's wing. And mankind, believing the laws of life, as Earth upholds them, to be too severe, falls back on a kind of petticoat protectorate, where to vague talk of Mercy, Grace, and Love is joined a comfortable sense that our present state, so far as it exacts a more elaborate, more fibrous, and if the word may be allowed, rather less sensational scheme of virtues, may be treated with condescension as merely temporary, and set aside as unadapted to evoke or satisfy the deeper needs of the soul. And thus the human race, having come to be what it is by obedience to Earth's law, severs itself from the hope of attaining that higher development to which she continues to summon it. It is on this account that Meredith views the influence of religion, as commonly understood, with great distrust. He perceives mankind as a mountain-climber by energy and by endurance making his way, not painlessly, and winning peak after peak; he sees the long gorge and the

far light ;—and then, it seems to him that religion comes to man as a temptation of soul, offering him wings that cannot lift his body from the ground and persuading him that there is no virtue in his conflict and his perseverance. The true spirit of religion, Meredith believes, is something totally different. To approach the matter first intellectually,<sup>1</sup> he recognises that his conception of Earth as spiritual and Man as the developing expression of that Spirit, implies the existence of a presiding and unifying Mind, in which the ideal that Earth and Man together aim at is present already. To identify itself with the Divine purpose, to be more and more a conscious vehicle for the expression of that Reason, which is the will of God, here is the object of all human endeavour. But Meredith hardly ever speaks of this unifying Mind, this Divine purpose, in the large. Few of his more exalted poems pass without implied reference to it,<sup>2</sup> but he has little otherwise to say of it, for one grand and conclusive reason : that he believes our present life, with its sin, sorrow, and suffering, and this harsh Earth, with her relentless, inevitable law, to be both in their essence and in all that may appear their accidents, God's revelation of himself to Man : for that there is only one Divine order, and this is everywhere present and everywhere the same. It is for this reason

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Trevelyan will, I hope, acquit me of any ungenerous sentiment towards his helpful and delightful exposition of Meredith's practical philosophy, if I feel forced to record my conviction that in denying to it a systematic idealist foundation he has placed a grievously obscuring veil between his author and the public. As poet or novelist it was no part of Meredith's business to parade a system. His object was to relate it to many-sided human life. But there is no reason in supposing that because Meredith's philosophy is consistent with sanity and common sense, the name of philosophy should be denied to it. No one has shown more concern than Meredith to maintain the prestige and dignity of philosophic thought. And it would be hard to point to any writer in the history of our literature—outside professional philosophers—by whom they have been maintained more worthily.

<sup>2</sup> See conclusion to *A Faith on Trial*, and *Hymn to Colour*.



that he can speak of the human ideal as shared or even as inspired by Earth. Man is, as it were, the climax of a continuous creative process, a process guided from the beginning by an implicit purpose ; he is the child of his conditions ; but those conditions are themselves the manifestation of the Spirit, of whose working his own life makes him conscious. He is not yet what he shall be : but he can only realise all that he has it in him to become, by placing himself in harmony with the great scheme of development : he must build his future upon his past. This being Meredith's position intellectually, his religious outlook, the attitude of heart and mind united, with which, as a man, he views man's hope and destiny, is wholly conformable to it. The future is in His hands who made the present, and calls the present good. Man's hankering for a Heaven in which Life shall be easier and sweeter for him than here on Earth is so much lust and cowardice. The eternal conditions of true living are placed before him now. The question is the same, whether his life lasts a short or a long time, or whether it is everlasting. And the question is, will he meet them, and as a child of the Spirit in which he and they unite, will he meet them with courage and with joy? Will he face the facts of life? Will he bend heart and mind to see what they require of him, and when he sees, will he give what they require in pride and exultation? Meredith is not the first of the great sons of Earth who has fought the good fight with a manful pride grounded upon this faith that is humility. History knows other names. But perhaps he is the first in whom the courage and joy have themselves blossomed in a spiritual rapture. He sings seldom. Much of his verse amounts to little more than a concise statement of belief, poetic only by reason of the earnestness and conviction with which he utters it. He has

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striven to sing ; but if he has often failed, sometimes he has succeeded. And he has achieved what he desired. For man has heard a voice which, heard once, can never be forgotten. A son of Earth has seen and known the Mother, and of his joy in her has made a living, an immortal thing.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE POEMS—NATURE

IT must always be a main part of the criticism of every poet to define his attitude to Nature. The growing complexity and artificiality of modern life tend to produce in many minds the illusion that man is sufficient to himself. There is, of course, a great deal of talk about the "country," and of the virtues arising from the simple life to be found there; but, for the most part, this is talk and nothing more: and those whose tongues move fastest on the subject are probably those who care about and understand it least. Even among serious-minded men there are not a few whose political or social duties are too engrossing to allow them due occasion to consider what is man's real relation to the world he lives in; they are occupied wholly with adjusting the relations of men to one another. And so to these, as to the others, the world of Nature becomes a mere recreation ground. They may appreciate it vaguely for its beauties or for the advantages it has to offer, to some of exercise, to others of retirement; but there is little or nothing in their mental and moral outfit which they recognise as a direct inheritance bequeathed to them by the powers of earth or sea or sky. And thus arises the tendency to

imagine that poetry deals with these things because it is poetry ; that is, to be candid, because being a far less serious thing than the practical life, it affects to be the more serious of the two, and hopes to impress society with its seriousness by flying high.

In Persia, wine, the rose, and the nightingale became stock subjects for poetry, and whoever wished to indulge in a dignified sentimentality had them ready to his hand. It was not that there was anything more poetical in these than in many other subjects ; it was merely that dilettante writers had learned the trick of using them : literary convention had built them a shrine apart ; through them was the only approach to the sacred enclosure of the Muses. Now it is a general suspicion—latent, if not overt—in the minds of many English readers that Nature plays for our poets, in a style more impressive only because it is more complicated, just such a tune as was played for their Persian brethren by wine, the nightingale, and the rose. The consequence of this suspicion is that the attempt to define a poet's conception of Nature becomes a singularly thankless task. It is as if the critic were required to explain how yet another superannuated child played with the toys earth held out to him, and was deluded into supposing that these toys could be the serious concern of grown-up men. Yet it remains a fact that the delusion is shared by all true poets, and certainly the critic of George Meredith is the last who can afford to pass it by. The truth about the matter seems to be this—that poets, though often unpractical, and ignorant or careless of much that is desirable or even necessary in civilised life, have yet on the whole a view both simpler and juster than that which commonly obtains, as to the foundational realities on which the complex structure, known as civilisation, rests ; and

therefore, in their account of the mind of man, which is the main product of that civilisation and the principal subject of their art, they occupy themselves largely with influences which seem to be trivial or external, because they believe they can trace in them a sustaining framework necessary to the mind's development and health, and deprived of which, if we can imagine it deprived of them, not only must it fail to rise, it would not for one moment maintain the level it has reached already. Chief among these influences is Nature, the "changeable, visible face" of mother Earth. Now Meredith, though poet, is yet a man whom the apostles of practical efficiency cannot afford to overlook. *The Shaving of Shagpat*, with which he opened his career, has efficiency, one may say, for its watchword.

Lo ! of hundreds who aspire  
Eighties perish, nineties tire.

He has done neither. Yet we find that he is at one with all other poets in writing of trees, birds, clouds, flowers, as if the knowledge and understanding of them played an important part, not merely in the adornment of life, but in its sanity and stability; as if they were necessary ingredients, so to speak, of truth and righteousness. In one of his most striking poems he describes how, at a moment of deepest personal sorrow, he walked over the hills and through the woods, turning to the familiar sights and sounds of earth to restore to him his strength and courage, and not failing to find a response in them to his need. Even at such a time as this he does not think it an irrelevance to tell us what the leaves or the birds are doing.

Weak out of sheath, downy leaves  
Of the beech quivered lucid as dew,  
Their radiance asking—who grieves  
For nought of a sorrow they knew :



No space to the dread wrestle vowed,  
No chamber in shadow of night.  
At times as the steadier breeze  
Flutter-huddled their twigs to a crowd . . .<sup>1</sup>

Here, clearly, is a poet whose "attitude to Nature" is something genuine and vital, no ornamental plaything, but a matter about which he is profoundly in earnest. Yet why, we ask, are we to consider it a point of deep emotional significance how beech-leaves behave before the wind, or what the song of a bird is like? To this question Meredith has taken care that his poetical work shall provide the clearest possible answer.

In one of his lesser poems, a lyric called *Outer and Inner*, written in a style and method peculiarly characteristic of its author, he makes it his central aim to explain and justify his "attitude to Nature." The scene is in the woods on a sultry afternoon in August. Stillness reigns, and when a motion of the air stirs faintly the lighter leaves, it is as if the earth were breathing. Stronger than ever is the poet's conviction that there is a life in the world of Nature which is akin to his own. But how is he to reach this central heart of things, how feel the rhythmical pulsation and win for himself something of its strength and constancy? The reply is not what we should expect a poet to give: by observation, by curbing the reins of fancy, by self-forgetfulness. He chooses, one by one, delicate points of detail that catch his eye, and describes them in a succession of broken sentences whose accuracy of image is their charm: the movement of the spider, the scent of the leaves, the sound of the flies that rise in a swarm from the path as he goes by, the iridescent light upon a cobweb stretched in a cool, dark corner where the dew lingers still.

<sup>1</sup> *A Faith on Trial.*

My world I note ere fancy comes,  
 Minutest hushed observe :  
 What busy bits of motioned wits  
 Through antlered mosswork strive.

(Though the woods are asleep, the ants are working busily.)

But now so low the stillness hums,  
 My springs of seeing swerve,  
 For half a wink to thrill and think  
 The woods with nymphs alive.

He puts the point at first half humorously, perhaps partly for fear the ants might be disturbed by it, partly that he may take the reader at unawares and give him without offence what he has most at heart to give him, and what is, after all, a moral ;—how should it be anything else ?

I neighbour the invisible  
 So close that my consent  
 Is only asked for spirits masked  
 To leap from trees and flowers.  
 And this because with them I dwell  
 In thought, while calmly bent  
 To read the lines dear Earth designs  
 Shall speak her life on ours.

In a final stanza he amplifies this in connection with a still deeper vein of thought, which has been made the subject of the preceding chapter. Consider Meredith's practice as exemplified in any other of the poems in which he goes direct to Nature for his subject—*Hard Weather*, *The South-Wester*, *The Thrush in February*, *A Night of Frost in May*—and you will feel no doubt that he has given in *Outer and Inner* the secret of his poetic method. And we may say at once that, so far as he fails as a Nature poet, it is because he has written according to a theory, and, so far as he succeeds, he succeeds because his theory has so much in it of the vitality and fruitfulness of truth.

It will be interesting to analyse in some detail a poem

in which Meredith applies his theory with astounding mastery—*The Lark Ascending*. For the opening verses nothing short of quotation can suffice :—

He rises and begins to round,  
He drops the silver chain of sound  
Of many links without a break  
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake,  
All interwoven and spreading wide,  
Like water-dimples down a tide  
Where ripple ripple overcurls  
And eddy into eddy whirls.

A more exquisitely suggestive and yet more exquisitely literal description, whether of song of lark or of any other object, is probably nowhere to be found, unless, indeed, Meredith himself has produced it ;<sup>1</sup> it is as if the lark himself were singing ; and the description continues, tireless as the lark himself, for a matter of sixty lines or more ; losing nothing of its force, showering one image after another, all felicitous and some supremely so, leaving the reader at last with the conviction that he never before knew what song of lark could be, that he has heard it now for the first time. And if he has now heard it, if he has listened to the song indeed, he will be ready to ask and to understand what its meaning is and why he delights in it. Briefly, the lark is a fountain overflowing with the joy of life ; he is the child of Earth, and whatever is glad and kindly in the works of Nature is of his kin.

He sings the sap, the quickened veins,  
The wedding song of sun and rains  
He is, the dance of children, thanks  
Of sowers, shout of primrose banks.

This and much more besides is to be found in him by such as are content to remember that he is still no more

<sup>1</sup> The singing of the nightingales in *A Night of Frost in May* is perhaps even greater as a *tour de force*, but it has not the same naturalness.

than a little feathery bird. A bird he is—no spirit—and a bird he must remain : the gladness and madness of the poet are different from anything he knows : they are at once greater and less. For the lark is indeed all a lark, but even the poet is still only half a man.

Was never voice of ours could say  
Our inmost in the sweetest way,  
Like yonder voice aloft, and link  
All hearers in the song they drink :  
Our wisdom speaks from failing blood,  
Our passion is too full in flood ;  
We want the key of his wild note  
Of truthful in a tuneful throat,  
The song seraphically free  
Of taint of personality.

And here there is a question raised that cannot be left without an answer. It seems that the lark has a secret which mankind has missed. Who, then, among men comes nearest to the discovery of it? Whom shall we most fitly liken to the lark? To look for him among mere singers would be a superficiality ; the resemblance must be sought in some deeper aspect of their common relation to Mother Earth. The value of the lark's song is the wholeheartedness of rapture it expresses, the spontaneous assurance contained in it that life is good. He has learned to live according to Earth's ordinance, and from the material which Earth has offered him he has produced a harmony. The same wholeheartedness of rapture is not yet compassable by man : for man's life is not yet harmonious ; but surely, in the meantime, those men are nearest to the lark who are laying now the foundations of a grander harmony in the future ;

Whose lives, by many a battle dint  
Defaced, and grinding wheels on flint,  
Yield substance, though they sing not, sweet  
For song our highest heaven to greet.

These are the true singers, the true soarers ; and it is only because here and there he sees such an one among us, that a poet, worthy the name, can sing at all.

Wherefore their soul in me, or mine  
Through self forgetfulness divine  
In them, that song aloft maintains,  
To fill the sky and thrill the plains  
With showerings drawn from human stores.

Thus, finally, the lark ascending grows to a symbol of all human progress, progress that comes of effort in obedience to the laws of life. It was by such obedience, given instinctively, that the lark learned to soar and sing ; and man, who has indeed other things to learn, cannot learn them in any other way. Only let him begin with that, and there is no limit we can set to the possibilities of his achievement. As we follow him in his ascent, the earth itself, because it is his dwelling, seems to grow more spacious, more august. Up and up he goes, with earth still broadening beneath him, till at last we can follow him no more ; for, like the lark, he is lost to us,

Lost on his aërial rings  
In light ; and then the fancy sings.

But, following the lark, we have risen somewhat above the level of the subject immediately before us. According to Meredith's conception, if we were able to follow him so far, the reason was that we were willing first to see him and be content with him for what he was. For to see Nature poetically is not to read into her a meaning, an emotion, supplied arbitrarily by the observer ; rather it is to clear the mind of all disturbing passion, to refuse to turn to the world about us as to a mirror of our personal feelings, or choose in it only what is in accordance with the passing mood, to come



before Nature with heart and mind alike unprejudiced, unclouded, ready to see, not what we want to see, but what is there ; anxious not to give rein to promiscuous emotion, but to respond sensitively, truly, adequately to whatever there is in the scene Earth offers to kindle mind and heart. There is a well-known passage in Coleridge's great Ode *Dejection* which appears at first sight, at least, to have a contrary significance ; and with a view to defining Meredith's position with greater clearness, we shall do well to quote it. The words are among the most beautiful, the most passionate in our language :—

O Lady ! we receive but what we give  
 And in our life alone does nature live :  
 Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud !  
 And would we aught behold of higher worth  
 Than that inanimate cold world, allowed  
 To the poor, loveless, ever-anxious crowd,  
 Ah ! from the soul itself must issue forth  
 A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud  
 Enveloping the earth.

And the name of this glory and of this light is joy. Coleridge is stating here, with all the fervour of a poet, a truth on which the whole philosophy of idealism is founded. But there is nothing in Meredith's philosophy which is opposed to it ; in fact, what chiefly concerns him is the statement of the same truth, only that he states it from a different point of view and, in particular, attaches no importance to his feelings about the truth, except so far as he believes them to accord with it. With Coleridge it is otherwise. In spite of the spontaneous grandeur, the irresistible melody of his verse, the reader who considers closely the attitude of mind lying behind it will detect this flaw : that the poet, though professing to exalt that creative joy which makes the universe intelligible, and praying the gift

of it for his lady, is, nevertheless, acquiescing in, and by his acquiescence augmenting, a mental condition in himself which he knows to be destructive of it:—

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,  
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassion'd grief,  
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,  
In word, or sigh, or tear,—

and on this account even the joy of which he speaks later loses a part of the exhilarating influence it ought to exercise, because the enthusiasm with which he speaks of it is seen partly to depend upon the contrast it offers to his present state; he is praising it and magnifying it as a thing that he has not got; and in the meantime he is giving a giant's power, not to recovering it, but to lamentation for its loss. Now, for Meredith also, the key to understanding of the world is a kind of joy; but, strangely enough, it is a kind of joy that comes through grief, not, indeed, through a drowsy, but what might rather be called a disciplinary, grief. He thinks it is the general tendency of individual men—and a tendency not always overcome even by poets—to set more than due store by their sensations; and that therefore the kind of joy in which their nature overflows, though it may have the charm of spontaneity, yet tends to be something self-centred and narrow—a quite different kind of joy from that which leads them to understand the beauty of the world and to delight in it. To attain to this latter joy, a man must first get a just appreciation of the meaning of his own existence, of which a leading fact is that he is merely one man among many. And so inevitable is the tendency of young blood to overrate itself and to regard the satisfaction of its impulses as a right, that this just self-appreciation and the true joy

based upon it are, he thinks, seldom to be had except as the price of a sobering experience.

Not ere the bitter herb we taste,  
Which ages thought of happy times,  
To plant us in a weeping waste,  
Rings with our fellows this one heart  
Accordant chimes.<sup>1</sup>

Meredith, then, knows, not less than Coleridge, that it is through the individual's power to think and feel that the world becomes a living thing, a revelation to him of beauty and order ; but he more clearly recognises, or at least is far more careful to state, that thought and feeling, if they are left to themselves, are not at all to be relied on to bring the individual into touch with the transcendent beauty and splendour of the universe ; and as to the mist that issues from them, too often, Meredith thinks, it cannot be called either "fair" or "luminous," but must rather be thought of as a dense fog, in which, groping, the individual loses all idea of the actual relations of things outside him, and sees nothing but an enlarged and distorted shadow of himself. To see truly, to attain to a vision of the world as it is, is a creative act, and no man can achieve it, unless, with whatever strength he has of love and joy, he has submitted to a discipline which may compel him to love what things are indeed lovely and to rejoice where joy is due. In short, the creative joy, to be creative, to be the source of a true revelation of nature and of man, must be founded on a certain kind of humility and self-abnegation ; and this, in the individual's relation to his fellows, appears as sympathy, and involves his taking the claim of mankind upon him, rather than his claim on mankind, as the centre of his spiritual gravity ; and, in his relation to Nature, similarly demands that he shall cease to regard his own emotions as the source of beauty in the world, and recognise

<sup>1</sup> *The Lesson of Grief.*

rather that it is the beauty of the world, if only he will rightly attend to it, which evokes and nourishes and sustains in him that power of emotion which is his life. He cannot indeed see the world truly except through emotion, or through joy; but emotion, though there is no true vision without it, will not, merely by its presence, make his vision true. For there is such a thing as spiritual, as well as physical, intoxication, a state of spurious ecstasy that clouds rather than clears the mind.

To approach Nature thus is to approach her in a spirit similar to that first made familiar to the world by Wordsworth, with whom Meredith, in spite of radical differences of temperament and outlook, has much in common. Indeed you may find passages here and there in Meredith's poetry which, except in point of diction, might have been written by Wordsworth himself. Perhaps the most notable example is from *The Thrush in February*, where, describing his own practical ideal and the benefit he has of it, Meredith says:—

So mine are these new fruitings rich  
    *The simple to the common brings;*  
I keep the youth of those who pitch  
    Their joy in this old heart of things.

Attempting to indicate the true attitude of Man to Nature, Wordsworth spoke of a "wise passiveness." The problem left by him unsolved was how that wisdom in passivity was to be attained. Meredith, by a reference to his "disciplined habit to see," shows that in him at least the secret of this wisdom was not innate, or rather that he was not content to leave it as he found it. It is to be remarked that throughout his Nature poetry his main effort is to achieve the emotional unity essential in a poem without sacrificing fidelity of observation, and that he is readier to forego

unity than truth. The obscurity of many of his descriptive passages is, curiously enough, the result of this very desire for accuracy. It may be worth while to note that a poetic description is not addressed, as a scientific description is, to those who are unfamiliar with the object, with a view to enable them to recognise it at first sight; in a poetic description knowledge of the object is always assumed, and except to those who possess such knowledge the description is generally valueless. Meredith's range of observation is unusually wide; he has made himself familiar with many subtleties of natural phenomena which poets ordinarily leave unexplored; and he is apt to postulate in his readers the familiarity which he himself possesses. It will be interesting to take a few examples of clearness passing to obscurity—due mainly to this cause.

Or, where old-eyed oxen chew  
Speculation with the cud,  
Read their pool of vision through  
Back to hours when mind was mud.<sup>1</sup>

Of course there is more here than description; but, taken merely for its descriptive value, the passage must rank high, and no one could miss the force of it who had ever looked into the face of a cow.

The foxgloves drop from throat to top  
A daily lesser bell.<sup>2</sup>

This is exquisitely felicitous; yet, in a land where foxgloves were unknown, what meaning would be conveyed by it?

There chimed a bubbled underbrew  
With witch-wild spray of vocal dew.<sup>3</sup>

Who, that knows it, can deny the appropriateness of this to what might be called the "passage work," the

<sup>1</sup> *The Woods of Westermain.*    <sup>2</sup> *Outer and Inner.*    <sup>3</sup> *Night of Frost in May.*



more troubled and yet less vital, less melodious parts, of the song of the nightingale? Yet upon those who have not attended to the song and analysed it the suggestiveness of the words is lost. The piece known as *The South-Wester* might be quoted entire in illustration of this same point. Here are the opening lines :—

Day of the cloud in fleets ! O day  
Of wedded white and blue, that sail  
Immingled, with a footing ray  
In shadow-sandals down our vale !—  
And swift to ravish golden meads,  
Swift up the run of turf it speeds,  
Thy bright of head and dark of heel ;  
To where the hill-top flings on sky,  
As hawk from wrist or dust from wheel,  
The tiptoe scalers tossed to fly.

The poetic value of this passage is its fidelity, both of thought and feeling, to the chosen theme. All through the poem Meredith keeps eye and mind focussed upon the object, with a view to make his verse the vehicle, not of a vague rapture, but precisely of those images, ideas, emotions roused in his mind, particularly in the South of England, on a day when the wind is blowing from the south-west ; and the intelligibility of the poem to one or another reader depends primarily on the extent to which he has entered into the experiences on which it is based.

Of course, the final poetic achievement would be to combine this accuracy of focus with a sustained emotional exaltation—such, for example, as every one recognises in the choric passages of the *Prometheus Unbound*. This kind of exaltation is for the most part accepted by poets and by their readers as an end in itself, and the attaining it, at whatever sacrifice of objective truth, the touchstone of true poetry. Meredith, however, is never satisfied with it. Admit that it is, on

the whole, a fault in his poetry that the element of passion, the only reliable source of artistic unity, takes too often a secondary place, the explanation, if not the justification, of this fault is to be found in his firm resolve never to allow passion to become lawless and unbridled, or to substitute itself for the object as centre of interest or as formative principle guiding the narration. His ideal is to have passion for a servant, not a master. He is not content to be a mere poet, one in whom passion leads. He must have an equality of thought and passion, passion and thought made one. He looks to an ideal state, ahead of Plato's, in which the philosophers are poets and the poets philosophers. And his contribution to the attainment of the ideal is a kind of poetry, in which the emphasis is constantly laid upon the actuality that underlies each thought and image, in which the poetic content is not the emotion kindled by earth or sea or sky, but earth, sea, sky themselves as revealed to thought by the emotion they enkindle. Perhaps he approaches nearest to perfect fulfilment of his aim in the *Hymn to Colour*. There is hardly a line or a phrase in this sublime allegory of Life and Death and Love but recalls with exactitude some living feature of colour, outline, or atmosphere, to enhance the splendour of that vision of the dawn, of which the allegory is a spiritual interpretation. So keen is Meredith in his loyalty to the inspiring object, that there are passages even in the *Hymn to Colour* where the observer is allowed momentarily to usurp the poet's place.<sup>1</sup> But even at the moment of supreme rapture, the poet can still rely on his "disciplined

<sup>1</sup> The lines—

But Love remembers how the sky was green,  
And how the grasses glimmered lightest blue,

may be quoted as an example of this.

habit to see," and becomes an immeasurably greater poet on that account.

Love saw the emissary eglantine  
Break wave round thy white feet above the gloom ;  
Lay finger on thy star ; thy raiment line  
With cherub wing and limb ; wed thy soft bloom,  
Gold-quivering like sun-rays in thistle-down,  
Earth under rolling brown.

This indeed is the sunrise as Love sees it ; it is Nature, as revealed to that poetic vision before which the veil is withdrawn, and the Spirit of Earth appears clothed in the same strength and beauty which man himself aspires to and which, whenever he recognises them, he worships.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE POEMS—MAN

IN the two preceding chapters we have attempted to analyse and define, first, the conception which is the inspiring source of the whole of Meredith's mature poetic work, the conception of Earth as a great spiritual unity, embracing both Nature and Man ; and, secondly, the message which he believes that Nature, the simpler and more primitive expression of the life of Earth, has to offer to Man, her latest born. Meredith is the poet of evolution. According to his idea, the value to Man of the study of Nature is that in Nature he finds the conditions out of which he has himself emerged ; or, to put it more accurately, from which he neither has emerged nor ever can ; to which, rather, he still is and always must be required to accommodate himself, if he is to continue the evolutionary process and grow to a closer unity with the Creative Mind. This idea, which is more or less directly stated or implied in all the more important poems, becomes itself the theme of one of the most charming of the lighter pieces—that named *Melampus*. Melampus, the physician-naturalist of an earlier day, becomes in Meredith's hands a type of those who, by love and observation of Earth's younger children, spring a deep source of wisdom

applicable to the most far-reaching problems of the life of man—

For him the woods were a home and gave him the key  
Of knowledge, thirst for their treasures in herbs and flowers.  
The secrets held by the creatures nearer than we  
To Earth he sought, and the link of their life with ours :  
And where alike we are, unlike where, and the veined  
Division, veined parallel, of a blood that flows  
In them, in us, from the source by man unattained  
Save marks he well what the mystical woods disclose.

Here, precisely, is the question before us in this chapter. We have followed Meredith through his identification of Man and Nature ; but we have not yet given specific attention to his conception of Man himself, to his analysis of those mental and moral qualities which are peculiar to mankind ; qualities by no means unnatural, still less antinatural ; but natural in a wider and more comprehensive sense, and possessed by man alone, simply because he has risen by understanding to a height which the animals have not had wits to attain.

The leading facts of human life as Meredith interprets it are, perhaps, reducible to three. First, you have the animal in man and the animal's energies ; that is, you have man in that condition in which he differs from the animal mainly in that he has a mind better equipped to get for him what his body wants. Next, you have the soul and the soul's activities ; that is, you have man in that condition in which his body has become merely an instrument trained to follow and fulfil the mind's desires. And, last, you have the never-ceasing process by which the animal rises to the spiritual man. It is upon this process that Meredith keeps his eyes continually fixed. What are the principles, again and again he asks himself, by which man's actions must be guided if he is to reach the plenitude



of his spiritual stature? His first task clearly is to introduce order into his instincts; to take the natural force, the pulse of life within him, and tune it for achievement of the highest purposes of which it is capable. But if you are to attune this force, you must preserve it. The spiritual life can be built only upon a basis of animal energy; waste, despise it at your peril; it is this that gives you the bricks, the rough material, without which there is no edification. The theme is one upon which Meredith is never tired of harping. Is there, he asks, the east wind cutting through him,

Meaning in a day  
When this fierce angel of the air,  
Intent to throw, and haply slay,  
Can, for what breath of life we bear,  
Exact the wrestle?

And, with set teeth, he replies :—

Look in the face of men who fare  
Lock-mouthed, a match in lungs and thews  
For this fierce angel of the air,  
To twist with him and take his bruise.  
That is the face beloved of old  
Of Earth, young Mother of her brood :  
Nor broken for us shows the mould  
When muscle is in mind renewed.<sup>1</sup>

It is hardly necessary to add that the distinctive quality of Meredith's poetical work depends for a large part of its value on the incisiveness, the clean, hard hitting, the invigoration, the grit, which are to be associated with the emphasis he thus lays upon the need for a firm foundation of vital energy to be the driving force, the horsepower, of the soul. Vital energy, however, is in itself quite formless, and the value of man's life depends upon his power to use it reasonably. Achievement is im-

<sup>1</sup> *Hard Weather.*

possible except through muscle, and yet mere muscle can play no part at all in the evolution of man: muscle must be united to, must be guided by, mind. No one who has so much as glanced at any work of Meredith's will need to be told of his perpetual insistence upon the saving power of intellect, reason, of "the sighting brain." He uses the word *Mind* almost like a charm, and it seldom fails to bring beauty, and even a breath of tenderness, to the passages in which he consciously gives it its full meaning:—

Let it but be the lord of Mind to guide  
Our eyes.<sup>1</sup>

Melting she passed into the mind  
Where immortal with mortal weds.<sup>2</sup>

Oh! but hear it; 'tis the mind.<sup>3</sup>

It were well that we should not let that breath of tenderness escape us; for, until we recognise it, we can find no adequate reply to those who, at this point, will insist against us that Meredith's view of life gives intellect a preponderance fatal to the spirit of poetry. It is undeniable, indeed, that he carries his brain-worship too far—

"Never," he says, "is Earth misread by brain."<sup>4</sup>

a statement susceptible, to say the least, of sad misinterpretations. It needs to be remembered, therefore, that the brain he worships is not the analytical instrument that "peeps and botanises," it is the power of thought strengthened and, as it were, warmed by the pulsations of the heart. Those same pulsations which, divorced from thought, are merely animal, united to it raise it to a power to which the word Thought remains

<sup>1</sup> *Meditation under Stars.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Woods of Westermain.*

<sup>2</sup> *The South-Wester.*

<sup>4</sup> *Hard Weather.*

inadequate, irradiating it with the deeper glow of that spiritual warmth and light, to meet which at last Love rises like a flower that opens to the sun.

Love born of knowledge, love that gains  
Vitality as Earth it mates,  
The meaning of the Pleasures, Pains,  
The Life, the Death, illuminates.<sup>1</sup>

It is this kind of irradiated thought to which it will be found Meredith's worship is, in the last resort, always directed: thought, that is, fused with emotion, and in this state of fusion termed reason or soul or spirit, everywhere recognisable by the harmonious nature of the action in which it is expressed.

Man's action as we know it is seldom thus harmonious, only intermittently does it express the spirit. Therefore Meredith devotes the best part of his activity to discovering and explaining the principles by which it is to be spiritualised. The idea of harmony, applied to social life, passes at once into the idea of fellowship. The life of the spirit is thus essentially the life that holds men together; and opposed to this the life described above as the animal life, the life of the senses, is the life which holds men apart. The true function of the senses is to put you in touch with a world outside yourself, a world which you share with mankind. But if, misunderstanding their intention, you value not the object revealed by them, but the feeling which accompanies the revelation, you are identifying yourself with something which belongs to yourself alone, and the spiritual life, the life of fellowship, is shut out. You are a prisoner, and your own senses have imprisoned you. Narrowness, confinement, is the essence of the sensual life, and to this Meredith traces it, as well in its most obvious, as in its

<sup>1</sup> *The Thrush in February.*

most subtle forms, including all in the one idea of selfishness.

But that the senses still  
 Usurp the station of their issue Mind,  
 He would have burst the chrysalis of the blind :  
 As yet he will ;  
 As yet he will, she prays,  
 Yet will, when his distempered devil of Self ;—  
 The glutton for her fruits, the wily elf  
 In shifting rays ;—  
 That captain of the scorned ;  
 The coveter of life in soul and shell,  
 The fratricide, the thief, the infidel,  
 The hoofed and horned ;—<sup>1</sup>

only when this distempered devil is cast out of him, can he burst from the chrysalis and be free. The natural function of the senses, then, is to be roads by which the mind may travel towards the attainment of truth. The danger is that they may get converted into mere conduits of pleasure. Thus converted they fly in the face of Nature, and Nature's retribution follows in due course. You have asked Pleasure of an instrument not, in the main, planned to give it you : you get, what you least wanted, Pain. At least, that is how it works out in the long run. For the individual who aims at securing private satisfaction is aiming at something which it is no interest of Nature's that he should have. Her whip descends upon him, causing in him much horror at Nature's cruelty, much pity for himself ; and at times he will fly for refuge to the defences of the cynic or the sentimentalist. Only, let wisdom lie but a little deeper in him than the skin, and the recurring stroke points him at last to the fundamental error, and teaches him to change his aim.

So flesh  
 Conjures tempest-flails to thresh  
 Good from worthless.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Earth and Man.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Woods of Westermain.*

As the social and intellectual life develops and grows more complicated, more subtle, the same error is liable to recur, cropping up to suit the subtler environment, in subtler, more elusive forms. To meet and counteract them a subtler corrective is required. Nature, expressing herself now in the developed consciousness of society, rebukes the offender with a touch from the gentlest, yet keenest, most searching of her weapons—she smiles. It is a touch only; but woe betide him if he is too dense to be aware of it. The touch is a reminder, the smile a smile of security. Attention is called to an amusing discrepancy between facts as he sees them and the facts as they are. More than a suggestion is not necessary; for the true fact needs no championing, it can be trusted to assert itself in due time. Meanwhile, if he is wise, he takes the smile for his punishment, and avoids the more disastrous schooling which waits for those who disregard it. The discovery, analysis, revelation of the idealist impulse in Comedy, is probably one of the most characteristic of Meredith's achievements. Man, he suggests, having risen from the animal, has a certain innate tendency to revert to ancestral impulses. The objection to these impulses as they assert themselves in man is that they are out of date. In their day they were of value, went side by side with a certain unconscious upward striving; but their value is at a discount now, because man's striving, grown more conscious, is directed to ends in which they have no longer a place. The consciousness of these ends is become no less innate than the tendency to animal reversions. And in the conflict between the two a further tendency is developed, the tendency to cover the animal impulse under a consecrating name. This tendency—apt as we are to be blind to it in ourselves—we are much on the look out for in others, and



when we see them indulging in it, we laugh. So very sure are they of their reward, so wholly incapable of deceiving nature even if they deceive themselves, there can be no occasion to take their posturing seriously. And as it is their aim to be taken seriously, to impose on others as upon themselves, the clear-sighted smile of the Comic Spirit cuts like steel.

Sword of Common Sense !—  
 Our surest gift : the sacred chain  
 Of man to man . . .  
 Thou guardian issue of the harvest brain ! . . .  
 Bright, nimble of the marrow-nerve  
 To wield thy double edge, retort  
 Or hold the deadlier reserve,  
 And through thy victim's weapon sting :  
 Thine is the service, thine the sport  
 This shifty heart of ours to hunt  
 Across its webs and round the many a ring  
 Where fox it is, or snake. . . .  
 Once lion of our desert's trodden weeds ;  
 And, but for thy straight figure at the yoke,  
 Again to be the lordly paw,  
 Naming his appetites his needs  
 Behind a decorative cloak.<sup>1</sup>

With the increasing complication of society the animal reversions, like hunted foxes, increase in wariness and cunning ; and the Comic Spirit, to be even with them, puts a finer edge upon his tools and has recourse to a higher delicacy of handling. But he stands from first to last for intellect in view of truth, in view, that is, of the object that brings men's minds together, watching their aberrations, secure of conquest, content to recall them to the straight track with a smile.

It will be seen that Meredith's theory of the uses of the Comic Spirit is an outcome of his brain-worship, his belief in the unifying power of intellect. Applied to practice, the theory seems to have this hitch in it,

<sup>1</sup> *Ode to the Comic Spirit.*

that almost as much brains are required to see a joke as to make one, and that, as a rule, those who most need schooling under the Comic muse are the least susceptible of her methods. Of course, one of the funniest things in the world is to see fun itself miss fire—as when Mr. Le Gallienne narrowly misses being converted by the last stanza of *Jump-to-Glory Jane*—yet it is hard to see where the practical value of this kind of fun comes in: there may even be something a little comic in expecting comedy to be so practical. And perhaps of intellect, as of comedy, it may be said truly, that it ought to exercise more influence than it does; more influential it undoubtedly would be, if there were more of it, if it were more a force that could be counted on. And Meredith's view is, that the chief hope for the future lies in making more of it. His firm belief in intellect as a reconciling influence, tending to harmony between man and man, is perhaps the most interesting, most significant aspect of his practical attitude to life. His own social creed, his enthusiastic Liberalism, his sense of the brotherhood of man, his faith in progress, his denial of any possibility of progress without a broad foundation laid for it in the aspirations of the masses of the people—these, and his other ruling sympathies, he has himself reached by an intellectual process, and his aim has been to inspire others to repeat that process

Till brain-rule splendidly towers.<sup>1</sup>

We are prone to think of the democratic creed as springing primarily from the heart, to regard ideals of brotherhood as the offspring of love rather than of logic. Meredith lays all his emphasis on the other side of the matter. Man cannot determine, by impulse, what the line of his advance shall be: all movement is not for-

<sup>1</sup> *The Empty Purse.*

ward movement, however generous the intentions guiding it. There is only one road along which true progress can be made. Man's problem is to find it. It is an intellectual problem. And truth being the same for all, and the ideal of manhood, the complete development and triumphant expression by man of all that he has in him to become, being realisable only when this universality is understood and acted on, the more numerous the seekers, the greater the likelihood of their discovering the right course and making an appreciable headway. The isolated thinker, even if he rightly divined it, could have no power to advance. The hope of the present age, in Meredith's eyes, is that for the first time in history the voice of the people is making itself heard, that the life-force of the people has appeared at last as the chief factor to be reckoned with by those whose work it is to forecast the future of the race.

Thus Meredith, by an intellectual process, comes to a result which the majority of those who reach it reach more intuitively. The unity of man, arising from a common relationship to the Creative Spirit, in whom he "lives and moves and has his being," was perceived two thousand years ago and became the inspiration of a life, immortal in human memory as the truth it manifested. By an intellectual process, Meredith arrives at the Christian principle of universal fellowship and endorses it. Such intellectual endorsement can never be superfluous. Yet it is a question whether a vital principle of this kind can remain wholly independent of the process by which it is arrived at; at the least, it seems that Meredith's method of approach to it has given him a certain prejudice in his presentment of it to the world. The stress he lays upon the need for a unified nature—blood, brain, spirit, working harmoniously—is hardly

sufficient to carry or to justify the degree of insistence with which he speaks of the moral claims of the intellect. Human nature, he says, ideally is one: its parts have not their true character except as unified one with another; and undoubtedly the force of Meredith's moral teaching is mainly due to his recognition of this truth, or rather to his unrivalled power of tracing and revealing the various forms in which it manifests itself in the wide field of human conduct. True human action, whatever the sphere in which it is to operate, is the action of the fully developed, the naturally balanced man: to Meredith, this is not theory, but a fact which the whole of his observation is summoned to endorse. This perfect, complete, unified action he calls reasonable, spiritual. It is the ideal. But in his analysis of it, and in his descriptions of the method by which a man may attain to it, a certain fundamental fact seems either to elude or, at the least, to occupy too little of his attention. He speaks of the forces of body and mind, of sense and intellect, not only as being—what undoubtedly they are when viewed thus in the abstract—elements of antagonism; but as if they exhausted between them the elements into which the action of the still imperfect man is reducible. The more popular analysis includes, from the first, another element, which we may call the element of emotion. And there seems to be a reason for thus including and recognising it, from the first, as a disparate element, co-ordinate with sense and intellect; for, from the first, it puts us in possession of a principle showing recognisable affinities with each of the other more obviously antagonistic elements.<sup>1</sup> If normal human

<sup>1</sup> I am not unaware that Meredith speaks often of a triad of elements.

Blood and brain and spirit, three,  
Say the deepest gnomes of earth,  
Join for true felicity.

But where is the distinction between the third member of the

nature were indeed rightly analysable into mere blood and brain, it is impossible to see how there should ever be cessation of the war between them—in which one of the two might well be victorious, yet without overcoming their essential antagonism or securing a true unity. And Meredith, while he never wearies of inculcating unity, the harmonious nature, as the test of spiritual achievement, seems to acknowledge no neutral ground to which he can point the combatants for adjustment of their differences. For the irradiated thought we spoke of earlier appears in his system as the result of victory, whereas what we need is a light to fall upon the battlefield, a suspension of hostilities in which the enemies may have view of their common humanity. Just such a light, just such a neutral ground the emotional nature can supply, ground rightly to be called neutral because raised above the scene of conflict. There are all kinds of emotion—good, bad, and indifferent—as there are all kinds of thought. But just as the last fact about the thinking nature, the beginning and the end of thought, is its power to put the mind in touch with the real and the true, so, of the emotional nature (in spite of all its pitfalls), the last fact about it is its power to place Truth itself before the soul as a kindred element, as something which, however vaguely apprehended in its separate manifestations, is, by its natural affinity with man's nature, everywhere trusted and desired. To reach it, to realise in conscious life and action his unity with the Spirit of Truth, this, man's fundamental impulse, the root of his emotional nature, provides his life—however crudely manifested—with the germ of a spiritual principle from

triad, called "spirit," and the union of the three, called "spirit" also?



the first, and, long before the battle between sense and intellect is fought out, wakens in him a desire for unity with his fellows and gives him a foretaste of that inward spiritual unity, which is the perfected man. I should have forbore to venture upon this criticism, except for the fact that Meredith, coming to the democratic principle as the climax of his system, seems almost to challenge comparison with the established religion of democracy. You are to view the individual as a unit in the human family. To develop and maintain so vast a family connection would be impossible without delicatest mechanical interplay ; and for machinery you must have wits. It is impossible to insist too strenuously upon the need of them, provided it remains clear that there is a still deeper need implied. For the development of the idea of unity, and conscious progress towards the realisation of it in practice, are unattainable, unless the desire for it is an essential part of human nature. Here, surely, is the ultimate fact. And it is the strength of Christianity that it takes its stand upon the universality of that desire.

It would have been absurd, where space is limited, to have spent so disproportionate an amount of it to a negative result, were it not that the student of human nature may turn to other chapters of this book and find ample exposition of Meredith's detailed treatment of it in the novels. Only the briefest survey of its main outlines has been possible in this. But, in conclusion, it seems desirable to deal with a charge which has been laid against Meredith's conception of human life in its relation to poetry and of the part which the poetic impulse has to play in human life. Meredith's so-called poetic vision amounts, we are told, merely to this ; that facts are facts, and that man possesses no higher faculty than the common sense that perceives and confesses them to

be so. In a very noble poem, the *Ode to Youth in Memory*, Meredith himself admits the charge :—

“This,” he says, “the truistic rubbish under heel  
Of all the world, we peck at and are filled.”

and the object of the Ode, as a whole, is to comment upon one aspect of the universal gospel of fact, fact as it must appear to those for whom the greater part of their life lies behind them. In what spirit, Meredith asks, will the wise man, when he is old, look back upon the tireless, the impulsive days of youth?

Days, when the ball of our vision  
Had eagles that flew unabashed to sun ;  
When the grasp on the bow was decision,  
And arrow and hand and eye were one.

Will he try to turn his age into a spoiled copy of them? Will he still be harking back to the memory of what is lost, striving to flap wings and soar in the old ecstasy of freedom? If so, he has that in him which will remind him “facts are facts.”

This is decreed  
For age that would to youthful heavens ascend,  
By passion for the arms’ possession tossed ;  
It falls the way of sighs and hath their end ;  
A spark gone out to more sepulchral night.  
Good if the arrowy eagle of the height  
Be then the little bird that hops to feed.

Then, in one of the boldest and happiest of his similes, he pictures the old as time-worn willows stationary beside the stream of life.

They now bared roots beside the river bent ;  
Whose privilege themselves to see ;  
Their place in yonder tideway know ;  
The current glass peruse ;  
The depths intently sound ;  
And, sapped by each returning flood,  
Accept for monitory punishment  
Those worn, roped features under crust of mud,  
Reflected in the silvery smooth around :  
Not less the branching and high singing tree,  
A home of nests, a landmark and a tent,  
Until their hour of losing hold on ground.

Over and above the beauty and exquisite appropriateness of its imagery, there is a measured and lofty eloquence in this passage, which might of itself enable the reader to see something of a new light dawning behind the supposed matter-of-factness of the world to which Meredith would introduce him. For, after all, there is no reason why poetry should suffer for recognising facts; the poet, if he will, may call his spade a spade; provided, that is, he has a plot of ground worth digging in—and if he has not, it matters little what he calls it. What sort of a life is it to which he makes his facts contribute? Can he so speak of the facts and the life together as to make them poetically real? That is all we need to ask of him.

But to return to *Youth in Memory*. The problem set by Earth to Age for its solution is the accurate adjustment of desire to the continually decreasing possibilities of fulfilling it.

Who cheerfully the little bird becomes,  
Without a fall, and pipes for peck at crumbs,  
May have her dolings to the lightest touch.

Nor is it common sense alone that requires this acquiescence: poetry, if age shall have its poetry, requires it also. Those

cravings for an eagle's flight,  
To top white peaks and serve wild wine  
Among the rosy undecayed,  
Bring only flash of shade  
From her full throbbing breast of day in night.  
By what they crave are they betrayed.

But the poetry of age, if it asks acquiescence in failing powers, asks something more; a merely negative attitude is not enough. There must also be a positive attitude to life and to the joy of life. Age, then, draws its inspiration from the faculty it has of living anew by sympathy in the life of the young. And to attain this

sympathy and make it serviceable, its first necessity is to have accepted the whole of its experience, to have looked without flinching at the lessons of its past—

To feel that heaven must we that hell sound through.

Rightly to understand the book of memory, we must leave no page of it unread. Among the rest, there will be pages that it will be an act almost of heroism not to skip. Skip them, and the whole turns to a meaningless farrago of sentiment and self-indulgence. Read them, accept whatever they have to record of error or of disgrace, and memory becomes a living possession, a principle of wisdom fitted to inspire and guide the future, and in the present a true sifter of grain from chaff.

Solidity and bulk and martial brass,  
Once tyrants of the senses, faintly score  
A mark on pebbled sand or fluid slime ;  
But present in the spirit, vital there,  
Are things that seemed the phantoms of their time—  
Eternal as the recurrent cloud, as air  
Imperative, refreshful as dawn dew. . . .  
True of the man, and of mankind 'tis true.  
Did we stout battle with the shade, Despair,  
Our cowardice, it blooms ; or haply warred  
Against the primal beast in us, and flung ;  
Or cleaving mists of Sorrow, left it starred  
Above self-pity slain ; or it was Prayer  
First taken for Life's cleanser ; or the tongue  
Spake for the world against this heart ; or rings  
Old laughter, from the founts of wisdom sprung ;  
Or clap of wing of joy, that was a throb  
From breast of Earth, and did no creature rob ;  
These quickening live. *But deepest at her springs,  
Most filial, is an eye to love her young.*

And this is the final test. For only that Age is truly sane and sweet which, loving life and Earth the source of life, recognises that there is a time approaching when, without regret, the torch must be passed on to other bearers. As the Earth-given life nears its conclusion,

the temptation will increase to regard death as the threshold of a life to be renewed elsewhere. Meredith thinks that experience gives no warrant for such a belief. The last word for Age, as in a different sense for Youth also, is self-effacement; and the life that has been lived truly will not pass utterly away; it will remain as an inspiring memory to those that come after it. And this is a true immortality; for to live in Love's memory is to live indeed.

With us for guides,  
Another step above the animal,  
To views in Alpine thought are they helped on.  
Good if so far we live in them when gone!

The *Ode to Youth in Memory* is thus a singularly characteristic product of Meredith's poetic genius. Poetry, he everywhere says, is not dreams and vague desires; poetry is truth; it is desire accepting necessity, and by acceptance transforming it. And he says here, it is not merely life at overflow that makes poetry; age has it still; poetry may be the final word of life as it departs. It is his achievement in the *Ode to Youth in Memory* to have shown how this may be. He looks calmly upon Death and along the road to Death, and shows that to the last step flowers still spring on either side.

Life fails, then: Age is Age: but for Age, as for Youth also, there is still one gospel only—the gospel that facts are facts. Wishing cannot change them. Life would be but a poor cloud castle if it could. Yet, if the world we live in be indeed bounded

by the high  
Uno'erleaped mountains of necessity,

the rule to which we are subject is no iron despot's rule. It is true that, if we attempt to throw our wills against it, the force of our rebellion recoils upon our



head, and we are ground down. But, if we will, we may devote our minds to understanding it; we have the power to make of ourselves instruments working consciously in its service. It is those who recognise this power and use it, who hold the secret of all human progress; they are the guardians of the future, the only true prophets of what the future holds in store. Theirs is the true vision, be they young or old; the vision for which life attains to truth as it attains to poetry, poetry being the final expression of man's joy in the harmonious laws of life.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE POEMS. MEREDITH AS ARTIST AND CRAFTSMAN

IT is generally accounted bad criticism to treat a poet's subject-matter as separable from his manner of presenting it. Such a treatment, however, provided it makes no claim to be taken for criticism of the completed work, is perfectly justifiable: nor could any right estimate of the work of the greatest poets be obtained, unless it were possible to consider the content of their poetry in abstraction from its form. In poetry the form and the content are indissolubly united; but to assert this unity is something quite different from asserting that a poem is always to be looked at in both aspects at once. Nothing, for example, could be simpler than to abstract from such a poem as the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam the philosophic theory of life which it expresses; a part of the writer's aim was to give expression to such a theory; and it must be a part of every reader's to understand it and estimate its value. But the inadequacy of the theory, if it be found inadequate, will only bear remotely on the question (which is indeed no question) of the excellence of the *Rubaiyat* as a work of art; and this will call for separate assessment. It is particularly necessary in Meredith's case to abstract the matter of his poetry from the form; for the ideas of which the matter is

constituted, though the world is fast growing familiar with them, are still, on the whole, strange. Now a poet who is also an original thinker is an uncommon phenomenon. A poet is generally content to reflect the thoughts of others; the very fact that others share his thought gives life and enthusiasm to his apprehension of it, and enables the thought to flow from him in a form in which its life is naturally preserved. And thus it comes about that, in approaching poetry, we customarily pay more attention to the form than to the ideas, as though hardly expecting the ideas to be other than we could have ourselves supplied. Meredith, however, twenty, thirty, and forty years ago, sought to give poetical expression to ideas which are only now dawning upon the general consciousness, and which will only be common property twenty, thirty, forty years to come. And therefore the task of the æsthetic critic, the task of determining how far he has succeeded in finding a living expression for those ideas, is only to be undertaken upon a basis of familiarity with those ideas themselves and a complete understanding of them. Just because in true poetry form and content are indissolubly united, it is impossible, while we remain in ignorance of the exact nature and bearing of the content, to pass any final judgment upon the form or to decide whether the required unity has been achieved. Thus it has been no inversion of the true order of things to begin by asking attention to the ideas expressed by Meredith in his poetry, and only now proceed to consider what is the intrinsic merit of the poems themselves. For, rightly understood, this second and final consideration implies the first.

But here, at the very outset of our last endeavour, we are called upon to deal with a formidable difficulty, to face the question whether our author is entitled to take

rank as a poet at all. "Is he accepted of Song?" The question has been asked so frequently that the attempt to blink it would be an affectation. But there is a class of questions to which—provided you make it clear to those who put them that they have reached you—silence is the best reply. Thus, in regard to the formidable question just referred to, we may point out that these chapters presuppose it answered, and answered not in word but in deed. Meredith has won his place among the great poets of our literature; and we may content ourselves here with the remark that his writing was, from the first, seen to possess certain characteristics which mark the poet born. When first he introduced himself to the world with a small volume of verses, his work was at once pronounced by eminent critics to be simple, sensuous, and passionate: they turned to Herrick, Keats, and Tennyson for a parallel to it. Meredith and Tennyson! but, above all, Meredith and Keats! The very idea, the mere memory of such a comparison, takes the breath away. But in 1851 Mr. W. M. Rossetti thought well to devote several paragraphs to the exposition of differences between them. The fact is significant, and there is this inference to be drawn from it—that Meredith's maturer manner presupposes the existence in its author of powers which, because he has not wished them to be conspicuous, he has been supposed not to possess.

Reverting now to these early lyrics, and comparing them with better-known examples of Meredith's mature work, we should be tempted to say that there was less of poetry in the work than in the man. His first themes were of a comparatively trifling nature, and he failed, as Charles Kingsley pointed out, to give them the necessary perfection of form. "If the hounds are running hard, it is no shame to any man to smash a gate instead

of clearing it; forward he must get, by fair means if possible, if not, by foul. But if, like the idyllist, any gentleman "larks" his horse over supererogatory leaps at the cover-side, he is not allowed to knock all four hoofs against the top-bar." There are not a few of Meredith's later pieces, before which the suspicion is aroused, in the minds of even his most enthusiastic admirers, that it was, from the artistic point of view, a work of supererogation on his part to write them. There is *The Empty Purse*—the supererogatory nature of which he has himself affirmed—and one or two other moral pieces and disturbing moral passages are to be placed in the same class with it; on the other hand, and more to our immediate purpose, there is *Phaethon*, written in the Galliambic measure, and presented to the public as "one of those exercises of the writer, which readers may be invited to share," in face of which admission it becomes pertinent to ask how many of the poems are to be classed among such exercises; or there is *Phoebus with Admetus*, not admittedly a metrical exercise, and yet, for all its charm, infected with a trace of the artificiality of practised craftsmanship or, shall we say? of the craftsman practising. The finished product has a hundred beauties, a rare naïveté of idea most delicately dovetailed into harmony with the strange lilt of the verse, but the delight it gives us is not quite of that kind we look for in a poem. Here is a stanza, describing how Apollo's presence brings prosperity to the farm:—

Many swarms of wild bees descended on our fields :  
 Stately stood the wheat-stalk with head bent high :  
 Big of heart we laboured at storing mighty yields,  
 Wool and corn, and clusters to make men cry !  
 Hand-like rushed the vintage ; we strung the bellied skins  
 Plump, and at the sealing the Youth's voice rose :  
 Maidens clung in circle, on little fists their chins ;  
 Gentle beasties through pushed a cold long nose.



We are to suppose a ploughman speaking: and if for a ploughman he is over-accomplished and his sympathies too wide, as a poet he is perhaps too playful in his attitude to the theme; not that we could forego the playfulness, but that the poetic illusion somehow is impaired. And then there is the refrain:

God! of whom music  
And song and blood are pure,  
The day is never darkened  
That had thee here obscure.

The mingled simplicity and uncouthness of this, and the studied metrical contrast offered in it to the unusual metre of the preceding verse, suggest that our horseman is "larking" at a very high gate indeed, and, although there is no doubt he clears it, we think we catch the rattle of his hoofs as he goes over.

This element of conscious craftsmanship or experimentation, recognisable in Meredith's poetical work from the beginning, needs to be noticed, because it is undoubtedly a weak spot in his poetic armour. No recognition of his greatness as a poet can be unassailable unless based on frankest admission of his defects. And his principal defect—if we have divined it rightly—is a very grave defect indeed, nothing less than the absence of *instinctive* security in the matter of form. The hexameters, published in 1851, are indeed worse as hexameters than the Fragments of the Iliad in translation published fifty years later; but the true spirit of the verse appears in neither. Again, the *Cageing of Ares*, except for the early *Shipwreck of Idomeneus* the only piece of blank verse Meredith has produced, must be described simply as a failure so far as the handling of the rhythm is concerned. Meredith is a master in literature; but in the *Cageing of Ares* you may find a passage twenty-three lines in length where

in twenty-two cases there is a pause at the end of the line ; and this is not the writing of a master. The insecurity to which these errors point is to be traced in some, even, of the pieces in which the greatness of poetic achievement is least disputable. The *Meditation under Stars* rises in the fourth stanza to a splendour and measured weight of diction for which we should need to look to Milton for a parallel ; but it opens quite unconvincingly, with hardly more effect, so far as the form is concerned, than a well-written exercise.

What links are ours with orbs that are  
So resolutely far ?

It is a weak first line, an unhappy note to strike in prelude to a theme both itself so sublime and to be so sublimely handled. And the fact that there is an intention in its weakness,—that it is used consciously to suggest the hesitancy which might have prompted the question,—this does not strengthen it. In recognising the artifice, we recognise the intrusion of a piece of incongruous realism. The only effect, artistically considered, of this succession of jerky monosyllables is, as it were, to set the mind on stilts (not a right attitude for any kind of profitable star-gazing), and all through the first stanza, despite the harmonious beauty of the greater number of the verses composing it, the memory of this stilted motion is never quite obliterated ; the irregularity of the rhyme, a slight faultiness perhaps of language, perhaps of association, in one or two expressions, suffice to prolong the opening sense of discomfort. And then a second check is given in the changed construction of the second stanza.

These visible immortals beam  
Allurement to the dream :  
Ireful at human hungers brook  
No question in the look.

The change is intelligible enough. We are to throw down our stilts; the sentimentalist is warned, with terse severity, to stifle fantastic aspirations. But, again, there is something mechanical in the execution of the idea; the form is over-elaborate; the changes are not felt instinctively; they seem, if anything, to be offered as a substitute, in this introductory section of the Ode, for a pure poetic conception; with the result that they are poetically unconvincing, and our relief is indescribable when the poet at last sails away into the larger atmosphere where trivialities are forgotten, and in which, retaining all the asperities and obscurities of his style, he uses them as instruments subservient to a grand symphonic harmony.

The spirit leaps alight,  
Doubts not in them is he,  
The binder of his sheaves, the same, the right :  
Of magnitude to magnitude is wrought,  
To feel it large of the great life they hold :  
In them to come, or vaster interwolved,  
The issues known in us, our unsolved solved :  
That there with toil Life climbs the self-same Tree,  
Whose roots enrichment have from ripeness dropped.  
So may we read and little find them cold :  
Let it but be the lord of Mind to guide  
Our eyes; no branch of Reason's growing lopped ;  
Nor dreaming on a dream ; but fortified  
By day to penetrate black midnight ; see,  
Hear, feel, outside the senses ; even that we,  
The specks of dust upon a mound of mould,  
We who reflect those rays, though low our place,  
To them are lastingly allied.

You may not know what this means when you read it for the first time ; but you cannot read it without knowing at once that it is poetry, and poetry of the most exalted kind.

Among Meredith's lighter efforts none enjoys greater popularity than *Love in the Valley*. This is unfortunate : not that the poem does not deserve to be

popular, but that its merits are not, on the whole, those that are most characteristic, most essential in its author, while yet it so far exemplifies certain characteristic defects as to create or make way for a prejudice in the minds of readers who turn to it as an introduction to Meredith's poetical work. For even *Love in the Valley*, with all its exquisite melodiousness, is somewhat over-studied, somewhat precious, somewhat unreal. Just because you have, not merely a flowing, but a rippling, rhythm, with every ripple differently shaped and every least difference calculated for its effect, it becomes almost an annoyance to find here and there a verse that violates the very laws on recognition of which the whole significance of the melody depends. Rightly to scan the lines you must understand that, in addition to the ordinary long and short, accented or unaccented, syllables, you have to deal with a further long accented syllable equivalent in value to the normal long and short combined; that is, the measure being trochaic, you are liable at any point in the line to have the trochee replaced by a single long accented syllable. Very piquant and unusual, very beautiful also, are the effects that Meredith obtains by this expedient. In

Large and smoky red the Sún's cóld dísk dróps  
he uses four in succession, onomatopœically. In

Úp laínes, wóods thróugh, they troop in joyful bands,  
he does the same, even more boldly, at the beginning of the line. In

Streaming like the flág-réed Sóuth Wést blówn  
we have five, leading us in a triumphal progress to the conclusion. And the success, the true metrical effect, of these lines depends upon the fact that the accent imposes itself; the reader is asked to be more than usually

attentive to degrees of stress, but, granted this attentiveness on his part, the writing is such that there can be no question what the stresses are or where they fall. But to arouse sensitive attention of this kind is to incur a responsibility ; you must respect what you have aroused. Thus, in the couplet,

No, she is athirst and drinking up her wonder,  
Earth to her is young as the slip of the new moon,

the second line, with its inversion of accents in the last four words, instead of an unnoticeable laxity becomes a serious stumbling-block ; and in

Cows flap a slow tail knee-deep in the river,

since the sense telling me that *slow tail* are long accents tells me that *knee-deep* ought to be the same, the poet who relied upon it in the first case has no right to violate it in the second. To write in such a metre is itself a *tour de force* ; the subtler, the more delicate the gradations you employ for your effect, the more critical the spirit of poesy becomes, till, in the end, the least flaw seems an unpardonable crime, as revealing the artifice of the whole.

It would seem a mere perversity of criticism to suggest that Meredith, who has written some of the most delightful rhythmical studies in the language (even *Phaethon*, of which we spoke above disrespectfully, is a magnificent *tour de force*), spoils the quality of his work by metrical deficiencies : nor is it intended to deny that here and there he writes melody as spontaneous as it is beautiful. What we would suggest is that, in the mass of his work, he is either conscious of rhythm and in danger of artificiality, or forgetful of it and in danger of roughness. It would seem to be to the latter fault that two of his noblest efforts—*A Faith on Trial* and



*The Day of the Daughter of Hades*—owe a certain loss of bloom. The latter opens, indeed, with a melody as perfect and unreflective as the song of any bird; it is like a blackbird carolling; but the promise of calm water, of smooth, flowing narrative, with which the lovely first stanza tempts us on, is unfulfilled.

He who has looked upon Earth  
 Deeper than flower and fruit,  
 Losing some hue of his mirth,  
 As the tree striking rock at the root,  
 Unto him shall the marvellous tale  
 Of Callistes more humanly come  
 With the touch on his breast than a hail  
 From the markets that hum.

You might imagine the most beautiful poem in any language beginning so. But the note is imperfectly maintained; only here and there in the course of the poem do we regain this mingled depth and radiance of tone; the rhythm keeps us for the most part riding uneasily, and the roughness in the swing of it impairs our appreciation of the accuracies of detail by which this roughness is produced.

The best part of Meredith's poetic achievement seems to be included in those works in which the form chosen is at once simple and restrictive, or in which discursiveness or irregularity of form is balanced by a restrictive influence from the subject-matter and the deep seriousness with which he approaches it. Thus, of the two poems just referred to *The Day of the Daughter of Hades* and *A Faith on Trial*—we may suggest that *A Faith on Trial* loses in significance, artistically, as a result of its irregularity, or want of principle, in the scheme of the rhyme; not that there is virtue inherent in any scheme for its own sake, not that it matters whether the lines rhyme in alternation or in pairs; but that the haphazard system employed in

*A Faith on Trial* emphasises whatever complexity there is in its structure, whatever want of clearness in the presentment of the thought. And perhaps it is not a mere coincidence that the most beautiful passage in the poem is also the most regular and the simplest:—

I bowed as a leaf in rain ;  
As a tree when the leaf is shed  
To winds in the season at wane :  
And when from my soul I said,  
May the worm be trampled : smite,  
Sacred Reality ! power  
Filled me to front it aright.  
I had come of my faith's ordeal.

Again, of all Meredith's really conspicuous efforts, perhaps the least successful, from the point of view from which we are now regarding him, are the *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History*. That they are full of brilliant writing, that they show a masterly imaginative grasp of character and situation, need not be said. And the earliest written, that called *France, December, 1870*, has a recognisably spontaneous flow of feeling. The opening of the Ode *Napoleon*, which Mr. Trevelyan quotes, is among the best things Meredith has done. If Napoleon had been a poet, he might have written it himself. But the Odes, as a whole, fail of effect, not merely for lack of a clear framework whether of rhyme or rhythm, but also because their theme, though kindling all the author's enthusiasm, is of a kind not in itself calculated to guide or govern the energies it has aroused ; which in consequence surge forth for the most part in somewhat barbarous fashion and vent themselves, almost volcanically, like lava streams. Or, again, to compare two of the finest of his works, *Modern Love* is greater than *The Sage Enamoured*, not because the conception is greater, but because the method of presentment in isolated pictures, which

Meredith has chosen for it, elicits from him—demands of him, one might almost say—the decisive outline, the almost epigrammatic exactitude of phrase, in which he is at his best.

How many a thing which we cast to the ground,  
When others pick it up becomes a gem !  
We grasp at all the wealth it is to them ;  
And by reflected light its worth is found.

It could not have been more simply, more perfectly said.

Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like  
Its skeleton shadow on the broad-backed wave !  
Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave ;  
Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike  
And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand.

It would be impossible to imagine a description truer to the object, raising at the same time so admirably all the menacing associations which the theme requires. The repeated "k," what pitiless keenness it has in it, what bitter concentration ! And there is hardly a word the sense of which is not reduplicated in the sound, as if they had every one been coined to fill their places. Passages like this—*Modern Love* is full of them—show a mastery which staggers praise. Here is another, and one of the most beautiful the poem contains :—

My tears are on thee, that have rarely dropped  
As balm for any bitter wound of mine :  
My breast will open for thee at a sign !  
But, no : we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped :  
The God once filled them with his mellow breath ;  
And they were music till he flung them down,  
Used ! used ! Hear now the discord-loving clown  
Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death.

It is certainly not the least merit of passages like these that they seem to renew the vitality, to enhance the dignity, of the language in which they are written. Meredith, it appears, is among those rare performers,

under whose touch the instrument grows richer, nobler than it was before. But we may note that the perfect success of the imagery is partly due to its detachment. In *Modern Love*, with each completed section the chain of metaphor breaks, and there is a fresh start made; the writer is thus protected against one of his worst temptations,—if such a phrase may be permitted,—the over-elaboration of cross-reference in the use of metaphor; and the reader (though he may not always follow the story) artistically at least knows his bearings, and does not lose the force of a passage in preliminary attempts to discover where he is. Now it is exactly here that *The Sage Enamoured* suffers, from the absence, that is, of these regular recurrent breaks in its metaphorical system. There is equal, in fact there is greater, depth of thought; there is the same fecundity and felicity of image and of phrase; but, the narrative being continuous, much of the writing seems to miss fire, because it has not been confided to the reader what object is being aimed at. To be understood, it must be read twenty times at least. From the first you come upon single lines and isolated passages, sufficient in themselves to compel attention to the whole in which they occur:—

Slave is the open mouth beneath the closed.

He gave her of the deep well she had sprung.

But at first the impression they give is of floating spars in rough water, relics of a good ship foundered.

Are they parted, then expect  
Some one sailing will be wrecked!

Parted they are, and the wreck no longer in the future. At least that is the inference. It is a mistake, however. No shipwreck has occurred. The fact is, that there is a problem to solve; and the reward for solving it is the

delight which springs—not, as some allege, from self-congratulation and relief that solved it is—but from what perhaps seems the discovery, and is, at least, the recognition, of a noble, if a faulty, poem. And the faultiness would seem to consist in this, that the subject being of similar nature and equal complexity with that treated in *Modern Love*, the style is not rightly accommodated to the different method chosen for its presentment. Here and there an aspect of the situation is caught and pictured with marvellous vividness and force: but the effect of the whole is blurred for want of that clear articulation of the parts, which the method of continuous narration imperatively demands.

She turned to him, and, "This you seek is gone ;  
 Look in," she said, as pants the furnace, brief,  
 Frost-white. She gave his hearing sight to view  
 The silent chamber of a brown curled leaf :  
 Thing that had throbbed ere shot black lightning through.  
 No further sign of heart could he discern :  
 The picture of her speech was winter sky ;  
 A headless figure folding a cleft urn,  
 Where tears once at the overflow were dry.

There is nothing finer in *Modern Love* itself: it is a passage which "gives hearing sight" indeed! Every metaphor illuminates, and the swift transition from one to another image is effected with perfect clearness. This swiftness of transition in the use of metaphor is a characteristic of Meredith's style to which all his critics pay their tribute. The keenness of vision and exuberance of intellectual power which make it possible are certainly essential parts of his literary genius. But in his finished work—particularly in his poems—the effect he produces by it must often be considered faulty from the artistic point of view. For the artistic value of a metaphor surely depends upon the clearness with which



the image is related to the theme. A quotation will explain the point:—

Young captain of a crazy bark !  
Oh, tameless heart in battered frame !  
Thy sailing orders have a mark,  
And hers is not the name.<sup>1</sup>

The word “bark” is commonly used in verse as a mere synonym for a boat or ship : but when we see it used as Meredith here uses it, we cannot fail to recollect that bark is a substance of which some boats are made, and we instinctively combine the two meanings of the word, or rather the two words, in one ; adding to our idea of ship those qualities of fragility and unseaworthiness in bark which are consequent upon its being, what after all a ship is, a hollow and somewhat brittle shell. In fact, the word draws from its context all the charm and stimulus of a metaphor, and is itself a metaphor in epitome. But there is a further point. It is useless to call a man’s heart a ship, unless side by side with the image the root idea instinctively presents itself, concentrating attention upon certain characteristics of the emotional life to which navigation really presents a parallel. And the word bark is so placed and so used in this stanza as to summon up all these analogies with perfect clearness. Once the image is thus in perfectly clear relation to the theme, it is a matter of taste and convenience merely, how long the use of any particular image is maintained ; the metaphor of the “bark,” just quoted, dominates the entire poem it occurs in ; but the images may succeed to one another like lightning flashes, provided their common relation to the central theme is clear. Now Meredith habitually writes in lightning flashes : but it is his tendency to omit all reference to that central theme, which in their combination the flashes are intended to illumine. This

*The Last Contention.*

is apt in his hands to become, as it were, the  $x$ , the unknown quantity, presupposed in every metaphor, and only discoverable from the sequent images by a process of deduction. The result is a kind of obscurity which seems to violate recognisable principles of artistic workmanship, and much of the writing in *The Sage Enamoured* is open to severe criticism in this regard.

No longer colouring, with skips  
At tangles, picture that for eyes in tears  
Might swim the sequence, she addressed her lips  
To do the scaffold's office at his ears.

In view of such a passage as this—admirably pointed as it is when you have grasped the hang of it—who can be surprised if simple persons consider Meredith's mastery confined to phantasmagoria, and discover in his style, not the revelation springing from poetic insight, but a shifting kaleidoscopic shiftlessness?

It was suggested earlier that Meredith's highest achievement as a poet was to be looked for, either in pieces conceived in a form both simple and restrictive, or else in pieces in which, whatever their form, the tendency to discursiveness or freaks of intellect, on the one side, and to experimental craftsmanship on the other, was controlled by a high seriousness in his attitude to their subject-matter. Among these many of the Sonnets and the bulk of the great Odes<sup>1</sup> are to be included, with the *Hymn to Colour* at their head. Some of Meredith's least poetic traits appear in them: they are didactic: they are obscure. But side by side with *Modern Love* and the best of the novels—and so far as any part of Meredith's achievement can be separated

<sup>1</sup> The *Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn* must be excepted. Of extreme interest as a forecast of Meredith's later achievement, as his first serious attempt to utter the note by which he will be known to posterity, containing also in the opening paragraphs much splendid imagery, the Ode, for all its power and passion, seems to fail of the sustained dignity and exaltation necessary to an artistic presentment of the theme.

from what is after all his greatest achievement, the mass, the cumulative effect of his work as a whole—they represent the climax of his power; it is in these that he is most himself; they contain at once the most perfect and the most characteristic of all his utterances.

At the great iron foundries one of the sights offered to the amazement of the curious is the steam-hammer—framed to flatten a ton of iron at a blow—delicately cracking nuts. The task is performed with perfect accuracy, but it leaves a sense of discomfort behind it in the matter of adaptation of means to ends. Much of Meredith's lighter poetry, accomplished as it always, exquisite as it often is, produces a somewhat similar effect. We may quote for example the daintiest, and one of the loveliest also, of his pure lyrics—

O briar scents, on yon wet wing  
Of warm South-west wind brushing by,

What could be nearer to perfection than these two opening lines? Why! they have the very weight of the sweetness in them, the lingering, reviving sweetness carried, caught away, on that soft, moist breath of air. We must hear them again:—

O briar scents, on yon wet wing  
Of warm South-west wind brushing by,  
You mind me of the sweetest thing  
That ever mingled frank and shy:  
When she and I, by love enticed,  
Beneath the orchard-apples met,  
In equal halves a ripe one sliced,  
And smelt the juices ere we ate.

That apple of the briar-scent,  
Among our lost in Britain now,  
Was green of rind, and redolent  
Of sweetness as a milking cow.  
The briar gives it back, well-nigh  
The damsel with her teeth on it;  
Her twinkle between frank and shy,  
My thirst to bite where she had bit.

In the third line the "mind" is faintly disconcerting, and the charming effect of alliteration, linking the "mind" to the "mingled," hardly makes it less so. Then the phrase "beneath the orchard-apples"—perhaps because of its over-compression—seems just to miss the lyrical note, and prepares the mind for the second line of the second stanza with its patent revelation of the giant hammer nut-cracking. Spite of the delightful theme and the delightful execution of it, the poem is a freak, and to say that it was not intended to be more, even if that were true, would still leave certain inconsistencies of association in the language unexplained. A similar criticism might be advanced against the majority of the lyrics, strictly so called, perhaps even against *Woodland Peace*, the most characteristic and profoundest of them all. A touch of affectation appears in its simplicity and even in its completeness. And if it were not that the simplicity verges here and there upon obscurity, one might say it was too perfect.

Sweet as Eden is the air,  
 And Eden-sweet the ray.  
 No paradise is lost for them  
 Who foot by branching root and stem,  
 And lightly with the woodland share  
 The change of night and day . . .

It is a lovely thing: but there is something a little disquieting in the vision it gives us of the giant subduing his powers.

Meredith touches the height of his artistic greatness when his power is not subdued, but taxed to the uttermost. It is not that his language becomes simplified under the strain;—that is far from being the case;—it is that the peculiarities of construction, the bizarreté of occasional words and expressions, the ruggedness of style, the very severity of the claim he makes upon the intellectual apprehension of his reader, have here a strictly

artistic value as bearing recognisably upon the size and sublimity of the theme, and as expressing the artist's fervour and enthusiasm in presenting it. Here, for example, is a part of his invocation of the Spirit of Comedy—

Thou, of the highest, the unwritten Law  
 We read upon that building's architrave  
 In the mind's firmament, by men upraised  
 With sweat of blood when they had quitted cave  
 For fellowship, and rearward looked amazed,  
 Where the prime motive gapes a lurid jaw—  
 Thou, soul of wakened heads, art armed to warn,  
 Restrain, lest we backslide on whence we sprang,  
 Scarce better than our dwarf beginning shoot,  
 Of every gathered pearl and blossom shorn ;

or here again, a passage still nobler, more majestic, as concerned rather with the forward than the rearward glance, and thus more central in the mind of the author and dearer to his heart : the quotation is from *The Test of Manhood* :—

This gift of penetration and embrace,  
 His prize from tidal battles lost or won,  
 Reveals the scheme to animate his race :  
 How that it is a warfare but begun ;  
 Unending ; with no Power to interpose ;  
 No prayer, save for strength to keep his ground,  
 Heard of the Highest ; never battle's close,  
 The victory complete and victor crowned :  
 Nor solace in defeat, save from that sense  
 Of strength well spent, which is the strength renewed.  
 In manhood must he find his competence ;  
 In his clear mind the spiritual food :  
 God being there while he his fight maintains ;  
 Throughout his mind the Master Mind being there,  
 While he rejects the suicide despair ;  
 Accepts the spur of explicable pains ;  
 Obedient to Nature, not her slave :  
 Her lord, if to her rigid laws he bows ;  
 Her dust if with his conscience he plays knave,  
 And bids the Passions on the Pleasures browse.

It is no impeachment of the poetic quality of such a passage as this to say that it is a sermon ; what is relevant to observe is that the sermon is the life of the



preacher, and that it is couched in language which has the living qualities proclaiming it to be so. "For there might be a poetry," says Jowett, "which would be the hymn of divine perfection, the harmony of goodness and truth among men: a strain . . . which should bring back the ages when the poet was man's only teacher and best friend: . . . which might elicit the simple principles, . . . the essential forms, of truth and justice out of the variety of opinion and the complexity of modern society, . . . which should be based not on vain longings or faint imaginings, but on a clear insight into the nature of man."<sup>1</sup> This is the poetry which Meredith has made it his central aim to write, this the theme which evokes from him the poetic passion in its purest form. It is in those poems in which he is dealing directly with the nature and destiny of man—and with these we must include some others, such as *Hard Weather*, *The Thrush in February*, *The Lark Ascending*, and, most notable of all, the *Hymn to Colour*, in which he sees the life of man reflected in the life of nature—in short, it is in those poems whose theme is at once the widest and profoundest which can present itself to human intelligence, that Meredith rises to his full poetic stature; and he rises to it, both because they require it of him, and because, his stature being what it is, there is no lesser theme to which he can surrender himself whole-heartedly.

No doubt it is the absence of complete whole-heartedness which gives the bulk of his poetical work its experimental flavour. There are very few of his pieces which do not contain as much poetic insight, as much fidelity, and often as much beauty, of phrase as any poet of the nineteenth century could have given them. But they lack inevitableness: he made them

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *Plato's Republic*.

more because he chose to make them than because he must. Their tone, their atmosphere, their controlling medium, is determined from without, not from within. And this kind of external determination never fails to betray itself; for the true poetic atmosphere is imitable by no artifice, and there is nothing capable of producing it but the emotional stimulus from which it flows spontaneously. Goethe's lighter poetry has been subjected to a somewhat similar criticism. But the fault of Goethe's lyrics, if indeed they have a fault, was that his natural instinct for form—that instinct in which we believe Meredith to be deficient—ran away with him, and allowed him to make light of his matter. This Meredith never does: he never lightly indulges or trifles with his emotion, and if his lyrics are unconvincing it is not because they are not genuinely felt, but because incongruous elements are thrust into them from a weight of intellect behind, for which the feeling, perfectly genuine as it is, can provide no adequate vehicle.

But Meredith's magnificent intellectual equipment, though it baffles the artist in him except in face of the few subjects on which his whole nature is engaged, enables him nevertheless to combine observation and allegory—as notably in the *Woods of Westermain*—with a mastery of artifice which, if not art according to our central understanding of the term, must yet, in a subsidiary sense, be acknowledged to be both art and art of an extremely delightful kind: and the same intellectual power, though frequently injuring the poetic quality of his compositions, puts his verses—considered not only with a view to literary ingenuity, but with a view also to a hundred other traces of a master hand displayed in them—among the most fascinating that have ever been produced. It would be a pleasure to examine in detail one of the most perfect

of these lesser pieces, and I would suggest turning for this purpose to *The Orchard and the Heath*, both because it is—resembling in this, alas! the whole of Meredith's poetry—less known than it deserves to be, and also because, without being in the least abstruse, it shows the author's versatility, the many-sidedness of his genius, in a remarkable degree. It is a description of two parties of children, one rich, one poor, whom the poet passes in the course of a day's walk in the country, seen, both of them, in the light of a spiritual brotherhood typified in the blue sky, their common canopy. The first, among the apple trees, are those to whom life is kind—

I could have watched them till the daylight fled,  
 Their pretty bower made such a light of day.  
     A small one tumbling sang, "Oh! head!"  
     The rest to comfort her straightway  
 Seized on a branch and thumped down apples red.

There is a charm in this that positively exhilarates. The beauty, the sympathy, of the first two lines, the same sympathy expressed in shorthand and with just the suggestion of a twinkle from the Comic or some kindred Spirit in the third, the realism of the last, with its heavy fall of apples to the ground, it is all admirable; and yet one may question whether a poet has the right to change his mood so rapidly, to crowd so much into so small a space. Right or wrong, no one but Meredith could have done it, and its delightfulness when done is past dispute.

My footpath left the pleasant farms and lanes,  
 Soft cottage smoke, straight cocks a-crow, gay flowers;  
     Beyond the wheel-ruts of the wains  
     Across a heath I walked for hours,  
 And met its rival tenants, rays and rains.

The masterful felicity of all this is revealed in the last three words of the stanza, where artifice plainly appears.

You have the whole atmosphere of the village and the environs of the village given you in two lines,—including one phrase, “straight cocks a-crow,” which is a complete picture in itself,—by the end of the third line, though you will hardly divine the cause of it, the open heath is all about you. The gipsy encampment next comes in view.

Here, too, were many children, quick to scan  
A new thing coming ; swarthy cheeks, white teeth :  
In many-coloured rags they ran,  
Like iron runlets of the heath.  
Dispersed lay broth-pot, sticks, and drinking-can.

The details are so chosen as to suggest whatever they do not actually express : the scene is before you in its entirety, the animal alertness, the human neglect, the natural picturesqueness of it all. And now you are to watch a race, with the Spirit of Comedy for referee—

Three girls . . .

(if the boys had raced, it would not have been half so funny)

. . . with shoulders like a boat at sea  
Tipped sideways by the wave (their clothing slid  
From either ridge unequally),  
Lean, swift, and voluble, bestrid  
A starting-point, unfrocked to the bent knee.

The next verse intimates why the boys were wiser ; there was a fire lighting, and a pot to boil. As their observer leaves them, the whole party are awaiting the supreme moment, circle-wise, they lying flat while their dog sits upright in their midst. Going, he gives the touch of exquisite suggestion by which these children of the barren soil are united with those others at play among the apples.

I turned and looked on heaven awhile, where now  
The moor-faced sunset broadened with red light ;  
*Threw high aloft a golden bough,*  
And seemed the desert of the night  
Far down with mellow orchards to endow.

Take it merely as a description,—the significance of the one word “moor-faced,” the beauty both in expression and in idea of the whole verse, and particularly of its central thought and phrase,—here are things which for pure poetry it would be hard to match; and for full appreciation of the stanza you have still to consider its wealth of allegorical suggestion, to which hardly a word fails to contribute. And yet, for all its many beauties, its sustained penetrativeness, its astounding concentration, the general effect of *The Orchard and the Heath* is not of a poem, so much as of brilliant and highly poetical verse perpetually touching poetry. And perhaps the cause of this is to be traced to what might be called the negative attitude of the poet. Meredith’s faithfulness to the object, his stern, unyielding self-effacement, defeat their end—so far, that is, as poetry, pure and simple, was their end. One after another the impressions are caught, held, and presented in their essence; but fully to weld them together there was needed a determining, a contributive element of personal emotion, the feeling of the observer not checked, but overflowing; and this he will not give. No doubt, in Meredith’s eyes, the poetic unity of the piece—the root idea towards which his emotion, checked in its apprehension of the separate images, spontaneously directs itself—is found in reference to the all-embracing spiritual unity of Nature or Earth, and the charm of the theme is in the linking two different manifestations of the single Spirit. But then there is a point of view—and there is reason for thinking that it is a view the poet shares—from which we may say that the theme of all his poems is the same; and if we take the piece as a composition complete in itself to be judged individually, we are compelled to admit that this ultimate emotional unity is presupposed rather than expressed in it. And after



all it is by what it expresses, not by what it presupposes, that a work of art has to be judged. Thus of *The Orchard and the Heath* we may say with justice, what may be said more or less justly of almost all Meredith's compositions, that its true poetic quality only appears when the whole of his poetical work is made its background. Meredith's work lacks tone, lacks atmosphere, because, while he seems to be asking attention to a series of separate episodes, he is really labouring all the time at one vast canvas, seeing every detail in relation to a central subject, and relying upon the same vision in his reader.

But let us indicate some other among those fascinating traits already alluded to as springing from Meredith's intellectual supremacy and mastery of his craft. Putting his pretensions as a poet on one side, viewing him merely as a great literary executant, what wealth and diversity of achievement do we not find in his verse! There is *The Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt*, as pointed a discussion of the burning question of the hour as any one would wish to see, the whole cloaked in a delicate veil of irony and humour, an assumed seriousness in the form giving their full effect to both, a genuine seriousness in the matter held always in reserve and making itself indisputably felt at last—who but Meredith could have reared so complicated a structure, or devised so superb a combination of trickery and wisdom? There is *Jump-to-Glory Jane*, in which the more fantastic element runs riot (a certain spasmodic impulsiveness peculiar to some kinds of religious proselytism represented emblematically). There is *The Last Contention*, where wit winks under the mask of dignity, the Comic Spirit inculcating temperance. There is *The Empty Purse*, in which, having adopted the criminal rôle of preacher, by confessing his crime the

author would fain escape the penalty of it, and dodges condescension, half by his perpetual waggery, half by fastening upon an object who, being himself admittedly descended to the last rung of the ladder, puts the very idea of condescension out of count. There is *The Nuptials of Attila*, summarising in itself so nobly all those rare powers of cut and thrust and thunderous assault, the fighting qualities of Meredith's style, that the weapons of critical theory go down before it and it acclaims itself triumphantly for a true poem, unassailable. Then again, in lesser works, the same incisive powers find sculpturesque employment, carving statues of Bellerophon, Periander, or bracing, now a great politician, now a general, to still more strenuous endeavour, whether in the cause of patriotism or the wider cause of humanity and truth. Add to these the many pieces where the same clean, crisp handling is combined with a mood nearer to tenderness—as in *Earth and a Wedded Woman*—or—as in *The Appeasement of Demeter*—becomes servant to laughter; consider the many sonnets in which it is used, somewhat as Milton used it, either to drive disregard of misunderstanding contemptuously home, or to stigmatise with sharp satire some false or imperfect view of life or way of living, contrasting it with the true; and finally—for it is time to approach the most difficult, most presumptuous part of our task: having set out to estimate Meredith's poetical achievement, we have yet to sound that note of true appreciation, on which for the time being criticism may worthily and fitly rest—finally, then, recall to mind that in tracing this wide diversity of accomplishment, we have confessed ourselves mere wanderers upon the outskirts of the poet's heart and mind.

Turning the preceding pages, the reader may reflect

with astonishment how many are the disparaging words which they contain ; and the reflection must bring not only astonishment to the reader of them, but shame upon their author, were it not for his consoling intuition that there are some spirits whom it is at least less presumptuous to blame than to praise. In concluding, let us quote a poem before which the detractor remains mute :—

## I

Last night returning from my twilight walk  
I met the grey mist Death, whose eyeless brow  
Was bent on me, and from his hand of chalk  
He reached me flowers as from a withered bough :  
O Death, what bitter nosegays givest thou !

## II

Death said, I gather, and pursued his way.  
Another stood by me, a shape in stone,  
Sword-hacked and iron-stained, with breasts of clay,  
And metal veins that sometimes fiery shone :  
O Life, how naked and how hard when known !

## III

Life said, As thou hast carved me, such am I.  
Then memory, like the nightjar on the pine,  
And sightless hope, a woodlark in night sky,  
Joined notes of Death and Life till night's decline :  
Of Death, of Life, those inwound notes are mine.

Here the atmosphere is flawless, and it is an atmosphere with which Meredith has done little to familiarise us, the atmosphere of personal regret : a regret measured, grave, and, as Meredith always must be, watchful of truth : but a regret which, just because of the truth it rests on, extends from the past to the future, and puts both under a common veil of sadness. The warrior has laid his shield and sword aside, and, in an interval of that heroic contest in which his mightier self stands revealed, for once the lesser self speaks and speaks perfectly. In

criticism of Meredith's first published verses, we suggested that there was less of poetry in the work than in the man. And perhaps we may best grasp the sum of his achievement by reflecting that there is a sense in which that has always been true. The greatness of his achievement is inseparable from the greatness of his aim. If his command of the poetry which looks to words for its expression has seemed too conscious, too mechanical, the reason is that his life has been devoted to a great creative act, with which the spontaneous expression of passing emotion, even such expression as that which he allows himself in the noble lines just quoted, must often have been at variance. His aim has been not merely to find a fair form for personal impressions, but rather—fronting truth, and subduing before it the misgiving, the reluctance, of the weaker natural man—to create in himself, and, having created in himself, to express and so hand on to others, that form of emotional response to it, which, whether expressed in thought or word or deed, contains and summarises the ultimate artistic ideal, shows truth clothing itself in beauty. And thus that conscious effort which appears in his works seen separately is the result, as we have said, of resolute self-obliteration before wider horizons, and it is only by sympathetic understanding of this wide range of view that any just estimate of Meredith's poetic achievement can be attempted. His work, we believe, is greatest when he is most directly dealing with Nature and Man in the light of the Spirit which unites them ; and the greatness of his work as a whole is in the gathered, the cumulative weight of living conviction, with which there rises from it the sense of this spiritual unity and of all that it implies. We saw in an earlier chapter that for those familiar with his thought there is one symbol, the word Earth, in which this life and truth

are summarised : to have found that symbol, to have endowed it with the meaning, which—since Meredith has written—it must carry as long as English lasts, this is of itself an achievement in pure poetry which places him among the greatest of the sons of men.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS

CHAPTERS I-XXVI of *Diana of the Crossways* appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* for 1884. The whole, consisting of forty-three chapters, was published, and three editions of it exhausted, in the following year. Diana Warwick's history is founded on that of Caroline Norton, one of the three beautiful granddaughters of Sheridan, immensely admired in the society of her day, and popular as poet and novelist. Caroline Norton's marriage was unhappy, and her husband brought a divorce suit against her in connection with Lord Melbourne, who was Prime Minister at the time. This action was not successful. She was later accused of having betrayed to *The Times* a secret confided to her by Sidney Herbert, one of her most ardent admirers, to the effect that Sir Robert Peel had resolved on the repeal of the Corn Laws; the premature disclosure of this resolve led to a Cabinet crisis. After *Diana of the Crossways* was published, the charge was examined and proved to be false, and Meredith has prefaced the 1890 and subsequent editions of the book by the following note: "A lady of distinction for wit and beauty, the daughter of an illustrious Irish house, came under the shadow of a calumny. It has lately been examined and exposed as baseless. The story of *Diana of the Crossways* is to be read as fiction."

*Diana of the Crossways* is the most popular of Meredith's novels. Why it should stand first with the student of Meredith's writings it is difficult to perceive. The reason of its wider popularity may be discovered more readily. First, there is its connection with the well-known story just referred to; secondly, it is, in relation to the rest of the novels, conventional, and clever rather than profound. When the story opens, Diana is nineteen—beautiful, brilliant, and already with a great reputation for wit inherited from her Irish father. We see her first at a ball in Dublin, where she and an old General, the hero of the evening, form the centre of interest; the General says of her, "She makes everything in the room dust round a blazing jewel." Here she meets her childhood's friend, Lady Dunstane, who, with her husband, Sir Lukin, has been in the General's suite in India. The Dunstanes introduce a Mr. Redworth to Diana. He falls straightway in love with her, but, being of a practical mind, at once begins to calculate whether his income would be sufficient to support this bird of paradise, and decides in the negative. Diana goes on a round of visits, and her beauty causes her to be pursued by unwelcome attentions; even at Copsley, when she is visiting Emma Dunstane, the inflammable Sir Lukin has to make acquaintance with the "sheaf of arrows in her eyes." She leaves the house, and soon after announces to Lady Dunstane her engagement to a certain Mr. Warwick; Emma suspects that she has rushed into a loveless match. Mr. Redworth's railway speculations are prospering, and at the moment of the announcement he finds himself in a position to have provided for her adequately. Mr. and Mrs. Warwick arrive on a visit to Lady Dunstane at Copsley; he is a "gentlemanly official" without sense of humour, and

Diana's friend can in no way account for the marriage. Presently there are rumours of dissension, and Diana's name is coupled with that of the elderly Lord Dannisburgh, an eminent member of the Cabinet. The friendship has been encouraged by Mr. Warwick for the sake of its worldly advantages; but he is jealous, and Diana reckless and imprudent. He takes legal proceedings for a divorce, and Diana, longing to be free, prepares to leave the country. Lady Dunstane, by her emissary Mr. Redworth, intercepts her at the Crossways, her Sussex home, and persuades her to face the prosecution. The suit is dismissed; the plaintiff has not proved his charge. But there are signs that Mr. Warwick is about to put the law in motion to reclaim his wife. To avoid his advances Diana travels with some friends. On the Nile she meets the Hon. Percy Dacier, a nephew of Lord Dannisburgh and a rising politician; Mr. Redworth, who is now in Parliament, joins their party for a time. At Rovio, later in the year, she and Percy Dacier, in an early morning on the mountains, come within sight of a passion new in the lives of both. On her return to London Diana begins novel-writing. Her first book runs through many editions; on the strength of it she sets up an extravagant establishment and shines as a hostess; her dinner parties, at which Percy Dacier is a constant guest, are famous for wit and wine. Lord Dannisburgh dies; Diana, in fulfilment of his wish, watches for a night beside his body, and is joined during her vigil by Percy Dacier. The name of the beautiful Mrs. Warwick is once more in the gossips' mouths, and when the hero of Diana's second novel, "The Young Minister of State," is recognised as Mr. Dacier, tongues begin to wag about the friendship between him and the authoress. She is disappointed in the pecuniary results of the book (the

success of the first was due mainly to Mr. Redworth's advertisement of it); she is living far beyond her income, and begins to speculate wildly in gold mines. Mr. Warwick is said to be dying: to escape his deputed solicitations Diana goes to a little French watering-place near Caen. She is followed by Percy Dacier, who now openly declares his passion for her. She checks him, and forces him to consider the scandal his visit may occasion; but his action has revealed to her the true state of her own feelings. She returns to London and sets to work on a third novel, but her financial entanglements are bewildering: perfect dinners are swamping her income. Dacier comes to her constantly for counsel; she becomes his right hand in his work; she believes that she has her feelings under control. Dacier hears that Mr. Warwick is actually taking legal proceedings to secure the restoration of his wife. He comes to Diana, and begs her to throw in her lot with his: he is sure of her love. After a struggle she agrees to meet him and start the following evening for France. Her boxes are at the door when Mr. Redworth appears, and tells her she must come with him at once to Lady Dunstane, whose life hangs in the balance. Dacier waits at the station, sure of Diana. Till within a few minutes of the starting of the train his confidence does not waver. The train starts, and he has been fooled. On inquiry at Diana's house he learns the cause of her absence. He follows her to Copsley, but no allusion is made by either to the foiled project. When Emma Dunstane recovers, Diana makes full confession of it to her. After some time Diana returns to London and attempts to take up her old literary life. She and Dacier meet on their former terms of good-fellowship: his admiration for her is greater than ever. Redworth

watches their friendship clear-eyed: he thinks well of Dacier. After one of Diana's most brilliant evenings Percy Dacier returns to her late and alone. He has ostensibly come to confide to her a great political secret which will not be published for a month. Diana is excited by the news: Dacier seizes his moment and embraces her. She keenly resents the liberty he has taken and upbraids him. He attempts to win her consent to a date for their union; he leaves her smarting with a sense of dignity lost. Mr. Tonans, a famous newspaper editor, has sometimes taunted her with over-estimating her knowledge of political intrigue. She is in urgent need of money. She sells her secret to Tonans. Dacier has gone home in a whirl of rapturous feeling. He wakes in the morning to read his chief's confidence in the daily paper; and he has been trusted, and no other. They must have been overheard. In bewilderment he goes to Diana. She has sold the secret without being aware that it was of any value! Dacier leaves her, and shuts the door on his connection with Diana. "To her it was the plucking of life out of her breast." Dacier's reflections cause him to engage himself the same day to Miss Asper, an heiress who has been piously constant to him. Diana's husband dies two days before the marriage. Under the blow of Dacier's desertion Diana has herself come near to death. Emma Dunstane wins her back to life and to a renewal of her former interests. Redworth has never faltered in feeling: "He believed in the soul of Diana." She rewards him for his long, patient waiting by giving him her hand.

It has been necessary to recapitulate the main events of the story as a basis for comment. In enumerating them it would have been as little to the point to include Meredith's explanation of them as our own criticism.



We may now clear the ground by recording an interpretation of Diana's story, which, if obviously extravagant, must at least arrest attention by its originality. We have been fortunate enough to hear of an ardent Meredithian who believes that he and Meredith alone have the key to the story. Diana, he says, is the feminine Egoist; and, with a subtlety never for one moment approached in the book of that name, she is painted as such without a flaw. We would submit that the artist's work is revealed, by this criticism, less in its intention than in its result. Diana is brilliant, but can it be denied that she is self-centred? The object of her marriage with Mr. Warwick is to escape from unpleasant attentions: it is not suggested that she loves him. After his lawsuit it is natural she should object to return to him; but what sign does she show of being able to forego conventional advantages? She begins, after a brief trial of life in lodgings, to entertain lavishly and make herself the centre of a circle. At this point of our work it is not necessary to dwell on Meredith's views as to the right relation between effort and expenditure; but Diana, his favourite, oversteps the limits of her income from the first, and is represented as largely employed in juggling with debit and credit. When Dacier asks what possible object she could have had in selling him to Tonans, she pleads her dire need of money. Does Meredith really intend us to think that a woman of Diana's intellect could have placed the friend, in whose interests she was entertaining, in such a position? Here we touch the central falsity of the tale. We are not concerned in discussing whether Diana would have been right or wrong to go away with Dacier. The point is, she was saved fortuitously from carrying out her intention. At their next meeting Meredith adroitly takes advantage

of the fact that Emma Dunstane is in danger of her life; it is right, at such a moment, that their plans should recede into the background. But what is not right is that Diana should have made confession to Emma of her salvation from sin, and assume, on her return to Dacier, a superiority to which no action of her own has entitled her. It is at least a proof of Dacier's love, which Meredith would represent as worthless, that he reinstates her in his regard and esteems her even more highly than before his humiliation. And now we come to the point at which Meredith attempts to justify his heroine. He has laid much stress on the beauty of Diana's aloofness. He suggests that Dacier returns late at night with his great political news, half in the hope that her excitement may break down her defences. He tells his news and pleads his right to a caress; he gives it unallowed. "They were speechless. 'You see, Tony, my dearest, I am flesh and blood after all.' 'You drive me to be ice and door-bolts!' Her eyes broke over him reproachfully. 'It is not so much to grant,' he murmured. 'It changes everything between us.' 'Not me. It binds me the faster.' 'It makes me a loathsome hypocrite.' 'But, Tony! is it so much?' 'Not if you value it low.' 'But how long do you keep me in this rag-puppet's state of suspension?' 'Patience.' 'Dangling and swinging day and night!' 'The rag-puppet shall be animated and repaid if I have life. I wish to respect my hero. Have a little mercy. Our day will come; perhaps as wonderfully as this wonderful news. My friend, drop your hands. Have you forgotten who I am? I want to think, Percy!' 'But you are mine.' 'You are abusing your own.' 'No, by heaven!' 'Worse, dear friend; you are lowering yourself to the woman who loves you.' 'You must imagine me superhuman.' 'I worship

you—or did.’ ‘Be reasonable, Tony. What harm? Surely a trifle of recompense? Just to let me feel I live! You own you love me. Then I am your lover.’ ‘My dear friend Percy, when I have consented to be your paramour, this kind of treatment of me will not want apologies.’” Is it not difficult to adopt the position Meredith requires in this matter, in regard to a woman who has never gone back on her consent to an immediate and lifelong alliance with the man she addresses? Diana’s husband is dying, and any forcing of the situation at the moment is naturally repugnant to her. But it is hard to see how morality or good taste can so suddenly be called into question. Consideration of the former would have necessitated a clear statement from Diana as to her error in the past and her ideas for the future; the latter, a modification of her public intimacy with Dacier. Moreover Dacier’s fault should be viewed in the light of the emotional strain to which Diana has been subjecting him. Meredith’s suggestion of grossness in his action is surely the flimsiest of excuses for Diana’s subsequent betrayal.

And in regard to the actual betrayal of the secret, we should not wish to suggest that it is an incident which Meredith might not have incorporated convincingly, but rather that, in its context, it destroys the foundation on which his whole structure is reared. It has been Meredith’s contention throughout that Diana’s powers and intellect are exceptional, that uncongenial marriage restraints and the barriers of conventional routine are intolerable where she is concerned. He would have us believe that she is capable of desiring comradeship rather than love-making. A lover comes to her, believing in her power to appreciate political issues, and confides to her a secret of great national import-

ance. We are not now concerned with the purity of Dacier's motives, but merely with Diana's capacity to understand the nature of the gift he has brought. She uses it as a trinket to be toyed with and sold. There are moments indeed when, in comparing the thirty-first chapter, "Political News," with the thirty-fourth, we are tempted to believe the latter a practical joke, not excluding its title, "How the Criminal's Judge may be Love's Criminal." Set side by side with each other, the discrepancies between Diana's statements, made but twenty-four hours apart, are too much of a strain on the reader. In the first scene she exclaims: "'And you were charged with the secret all the evening and betrayed not a sign! . . . The proposal is? No more compromises!' 'Total!' Diana clapped hands; and her aspect of enthusiasm was intoxicating. . . . 'We two are a month in advance of all England. . . .'" In the second she pleads: "'You did not name it as a secret. I did not imagine it to be a secret of immense, *immediate* importance.'" And in reply to his amazed shout of "*What?*" goes on to say: "'I had not a suspicion of mischief. . . . I thought it was a secret of a day. I don't think you—no, you did not tell me to keep it secret. A word from you would have been enough. I was in extremity!' Step by step she recedes before Dacier's interrogation: 'I did not imagine he would use it—make use of it—as he has done. . . . No exact sum was named; thousands were hinted.'" May we not fairly demand of our author a choice between two alternatives? Either Diana is a fool, passing even the "ordinary woman" in her folly (she can entertain the idea of being paid thousands of pounds for information of negligible importance), or she is proving beyond all refutation that the political basis of her intercourse with Dacier is a sham. Diana, Meredith

admits, has made a mistake ; but he harps on the insufficiency of her lover's affection, and when Dacier goes out and closes the door on Diana, turns from her intensity to Constance Asper's glacial fidelity, we are given to understand that his error in the eyes of his author is unforgiveable. Worldly-wise and narrow-minded he certainly was, but why should this experience with Diana Warwick be expected to have enlarged his horizon ? A reversion to Constance Asper appears to us the only natural outcome of it.

It need not be said, since Diana is a Celt and one of her author's favourites, that she is a mouthpiece for much of Meredith's insight. Her sallies deserve the fullest quotation ; the Introductory chapter alone is a treasure-house of wit and of wisdom. But it has seemed best to set aside in this summary all considerations not bearing on what in this case has appeared to us of primary importance, the consistency of the plot. It is clear, of course, that Meredith means us, as was suggested in an earlier chapter, to conceive of his heroine as Redworth conceives of her : "Redworth believed in the soul of Diana. For him it burned, and it was a celestial radiance about her, unquenched by her shifting fortunes, her wilfulness, and, it might be, errors. She was a woman and weak ; that is, not trained for strength. She was a soul ; therefore perpetually pointing to growth in purification." This is what is intended, but is it what is achieved ? We think not. The events and the psychology of the book appear to us, not only not interwoven, but spun of materials so different in texture that they could not combine. The historical figure Meredith chose for his heroine had a tear in her dress. Every machine in his factory is set in motion to provide a patch for it. But the new material, compounded of philosophical speculation and championship



of wider opportunities for women, rich and rare though it be, is a misfit ; "the rent is made worse."

Diana's charming personality, her recklessness, her passion for Dacier, her life-history, including the selling of the secret, were elements well within Meredith's power to combine without injuring our love for his heroine. But to this end the reader should have been caught by the heart, not by the head. To start, and continue to harp, on the note of Diana's wit and insight, her scorn of sentiment and sentimental romance, her clear vision of the needs of her sex, her political views—in short, her philosophy—was to set a tune with which the incidents could not be harmonised. To have prefaced *The Tragic Comedians* with a championship of valiancy in women, with Clotilde as sole embodiment of the virtue, would have been to attempt a parallel task.

## CHAPTER XIX

### ONE OF OUR CONQUERORS AND LORD ORMONT AND HIS AMINTA

WHENEVER he is dealing with problems connected with marriage, Meredith assumes the existence of the strongest prejudice against unconventional action in the mind of his public. To the present-day reader he appears to over-estimate its force, and to be led to undue lengths in combating it. Much may yet need to be done "to right the loaded scales"; but women refusing the conditions which Mr. Warwick, Lord Ormont, or Fleetwood attempt to impose on their wives, would not be regarded as social rebels to-day. So far at least circumstances have changed, and we may think that Meredith, to whom much of the improvement is due, should be fully aware of it. However this may be, the many desirable changes which the last fifty years have worked in public opinion have brought one effect with them that Meredith would certainly wish to ignore. A type of mind has arisen which, reacting against lifeless constraints, looks on all social convention and contract as tyrannical, and wishes to regard each individual and occurrence as something unique, to be judged on its private and personal merits. This type has no place in the "honourable minority" whom Meredith addresses. In them a social consciousness, a staunch belief in society, is presumed, in addition to personal sus-

ceptibilities ; otherwise the possessors of those susceptibilities stand marked as the Comic Spirit's prey, Byron-like, "illuminated to the general eye as the very object of chase and doomed quarry of the thing obscure to them." In other words, if we can see nothing to be said for the claims of Willoughby, Lord Ormont, and Fleetwood, if, because Clara, Aminta, and Carinthia are superior to their lords, we do not feel they have incurred heavy obligation by their vows, we are not among those for whom Meredith has been writing. For, if we do not grant, what he, as a root supposition, is granting, the existence of real obstacles to his heroines' freedom, it follows inevitably that in exposing the unworthiness of his heroes he should seem to be overweighting his case. The art and the labour he expends to justify an exception presuppose the existence of a rule. At the moments when he asks unconventional action of his characters, its effectiveness depends upon the rarity of its occurrence. "When we find," he writes of one of the finest and most lovable of them, "a man, who is commonly of the quickest susceptibility to ridicule as well as to what is befitting, careless of exposure, we may reflect on the truthfulness of feeling by which he is drawn to pass his own guard and come forth in his nakedness."<sup>1</sup> We may feel that, in the face of Willoughby's persistent refusal to deal with a situation that has been pressed on his attention, Vernon might honourably have come to some understanding with Clara before she is formally released from her engagement. But in Meredith's hands, Vernon's honour makes a still more strenuous demand. Clara is at last released, cast by her father into her true lover's arms, yet he refuses to forget that their joy is founded on failure, and that its price must be paid.

<sup>1</sup> *The Tale of Chloe.*

"It was hard for him, for both, but harder for the man, to restrain their particular word from a flight to heaven when the cage door stood open and nature beckoned, but he was practised in self-mastery."<sup>1</sup> And it is because the word is not spoken then, that the meeting of two lovers, some months later, on the slopes of Lake Constance, is looked on by the Comic Muse with soft and friendly eyes. No problem indeed could exist for Clara, Aminta, and Carinthia, were it not for their recognition of a standard that is abstract and non-individual: and this standard Weyburn, in vowing himself to Aminta, openly expresses: "With a world against us," he says, "our love and labour are constantly on trial; we must have great hearts, and if the world is hostile we are not to blame it. In the nature of things it could not be otherwise. My own soul, we have to see that we do—though not publicly, not insolently—offend good citizenship. But we believe—I with my whole faith, and I may say it of you—that we are not offending Divine Law. You are the woman I can help and join with; think whether you can tell yourself that I am the man. So then our union gives us powers to make amends to the world." "Make amends to the world"; the first note, and the last, is this of good citizenship. This is the court of appeal, the test to which individualistic action is referred. It is therefore significant that practically the whole of Meredith's after treatment of the pair is concerned with their devotion to their great school and its striking success. Quick changes in feeling come of the blood, not of the brain, and Meredith has small tenderness for these. The union of Matey and Aminta is long delayed, it is to be brought to the test and approved; nevertheless, even here, a note of warning is struck. "Neither of

<sup>1</sup> *The Egoist*.

them quite perceived what it was which coloured reason to beauty, or what so convinced their intellects when passion spoke louder."

*Lord Ormont and his Aminta*, published in 1894, is much simpler in style than *One of our Conquerors*; but, the two books having obvious affinities of theme, it has seemed natural to treat them together. That of *Lord Ormont* is based on the career of the great Earl of Peterborough, who won wide fame as a soldier at Valencia, but was recalled by his country in 1707 on account of his high-handed temper. Privately married to the famous singer Anastasia Robinson in 1722, he did not publicly acknowledge her as his wife till shortly before his death, and many years after their marriage.

It is a commonplace of Meredith's critics that he is without rival in his drawing of boys, a commonplace perhaps too readily acceded to. As to the degree of his success in the representation of the boys' school with which *Lord Ormont* opens, there may certainly be difference of opinion. It is not, in any case, a realistic representation; but then, neither is the magnificent swimming scene at the close of the book realistic, and we must at once allow that, if actuality be demanded of *Lord Ormont and his Aminta*, the book will be found full of flaws. Is it, for instance, credible that Weyburn could have been in Lord Ormont's house for days without recognising Aminta? Is it possible, even setting her husband's tastes and character aside, that Aminta herself would have gone on bearing with Mrs. Pagnell's vulgarity? And then, in regard to a leading motive of the book, Weyburn's great international school rests on the shaky foundation of a tacit pretence. He and Aminta believe themselves justified in the step they have taken; Aminta's husband is ultimately satisfied, if not approving. But all this, though it exonerates



them individually, falls wide of the mark, so far as the matter of the school itself is concerned. The boys and their parents must inevitably think of Weyburn and Aminta as married; and thus, though the righteousness of their situation is arguable in the abstract, it cannot, in the nature of the case, be argued with the persons concerned: the pair must quickly have found themselves in an intolerably precarious position.

The story begins to live with the description—when Weyburn goes as secretary to Lord Ormont—of the unknown Aminta's gaze. "They were large dark eyes of Southern night. They sped no shot; they rolled forth an envelopment." There is pathos in this vision of the unknown lady with the cloud upon her; and the whole scene of Weyburn and Aminta's meeting is charmingly conceived, their old memories breathing through present obscurity. The tale centres in this cloud over Aminta, and Weyburn's consciousness and penetration of it are very skilfully developed. The smirchings from Lady Charlotte's rattle drop away in Aminta's presence, but the cloud is still there. Lord Ormont's share in the matter is only to be understood by realising that, although the original error is his, it is as a result of her own action that Aminta is in the position in which Weyburn finds her. Lord Ormont, like many other of Meredith's characters, has lost, if indeed he ever possessed it, the power of regarding any woman as an individual, to be detached from his general view of her sex. His attitude to the woman he has taken as his wife, though it differs in degree, does not differ in kind from the attitude he has adopted to others. Yet a delightful sidelight is thrown on the six years of marriage previous to the opening of the story, by their occasional reversions to the old nicknames, the "Xarifa" and "Knight Durandarte" of the

days of their wanderings. They were married at the Embassy in Madrid (Aminta is partially Spanish), and have roamed about Europe together ever since. Having been censured for high-handedness in his conduct of affairs in India, Lord Ormont was, and still is, completely at loggerheads with his country, and consequently at loggerheads also with his most intimate relation, the one person who is not to be deceived by his would-be contempt for his judges. He is the most gallant of comrades, and his love for Aminta real ; but the last thing he had expected her to demand was the dullness and decorum of conventional English society, and he has regarded it as part of the tacit understanding between them, that she should be included in his self-inflicted banishment from the land of his birth. But Aminta, mainly at her aunt's instigation, has now begun to press for settlement in England and open acknowledgment of her position as Countess of Ormont. The Earl, hardly more in annoyance than amusement, sees that to submit to his wife's tactics would involve coming to terms with his country, and, if the game of Pull and Pull is to be played, he is ready for his part in it. When the story opens, Aminta has so far prevailed that they are living in London ; but to all her hints and suggestions in regard to Steignton, the Earl's country seat, he replies imperturbably that it is let and that he is well enough satisfied with his tenant. Aminta's aunt, Mrs. Nargett Pagnell (her character is to be inferred from her name, and from her pronunciation of it, Naryett Pagnell), is staying in the house, and daily grows more clamorous in her effort to secure public acknowledgment for her niece. Behind this situation looms Lady Charlotte Eglett, Lord Ormont's sister already referred to, publicly incredulous of the idea that her brother has given Aminta his name : into

it, Aminta's old schoolboy lover and Lord Ormont's adorer, Matey Weyburn, is precipitated, and the story moves to its end.

Aminta is very gracefully drawn; her bewilderment and fluctuations of feeling, the whirlpool sucking to contemplate the dangerous passion Morsfield offers her, and the sweet, sunny contrast of her love for Weyburn, it is all excellent. Weyburn too is really a very pleasant fellow, and though Meredith makes him talk like a prig occasionally (partly by reason of his effort to prevent his doing so), there is no strain of priggishness in his nature. The scene by the death-bed of Weyburn's mother is enriched with some of the choicest flowers of Meredith's thought. "His prayer was as a little fountain, not rising high out of earth, and in the clutch of death; but its being it had from death, his love gave it food." "Prayer is power within us to communicate with the desired beyond our thirsts." "We do not get to any heaven by renouncing the mother we spring from; and when there is an eternal secret for us, it is best to believe that Earth knows, to keep near her, even in our utmost aspirations." And some of the adroitest of Meredith's sayings, such as of Friendship,— "If it is not life's poetry, it is a credible prose; a land of low undulations instead of Alps; beyond the terrors and deceptions",—are to be found in the book. But its power culminates in the two splendid climaxes—Aminta's flight from Steignton, and the scene in which, in Lady Charlotte's presence, her farewell letter reaches Lord Ormont. In the first, the description of the country flying by as they drive is one of Meredith's triumphantly living landscapes; the second is among the greatest things he has written. Meredith seldom appeals to tears; he does so here. Owing to Aminta's pursuit by unworthy admirers, Lord Ormont has been

slowly coming to see that his secrecy as to their marriage has placed her in an impossible position; and without her knowledge he is preparing amends on the scale of his character. After a long and wearisome tussle, he has at last secured from his sister the family jewels, which till now she had resolutely refused to give up. Lady Charlotte comes to see him, being in anxiety about his health. She expresses relief at his appearance, and alludes to reviving appreciation of his worth. " 'The country wants your services,' she says. 'I have heard some talk of it. That lout comes to a knowledge of his wants too late. If they promoted and offered me the command in India to-morrow——' My lord struck the arm of his chair. 'I live at Steignton henceforth: my wife is at a seaside place eastward. I take her down to Steignton two days after her return. We entertain there in the autumn. You come?' 'I don't. I prefer decent society.' 'You are in her house now, ma'am.' 'If I have to meet the person you mean, I shall be civil. The society you've given her I won't meet.' 'You will have to meet the Countess of Ormont if you care to meet your brother.' 'Part then on the best terms we can. I say this, the woman who keeps you from serving your country, she's your country's enemy.' 'Hear my answer. The lady who is my wife has had to suffer for what you call my country's treatment of me. It's a choice between my country and her. I give her the rest of my time.' 'That's dotage.' 'Fire away your epithets.' 'Sheer dotage. I don't deny she's a handsome young woman.' 'You'll have to admit that Lady Ormont takes her place in our family with the best we can name.' 'You insult my ears, Rowsley.' 'The world will say it when it has the honour of her acquaintance.' 'An honour suspiciously deferred.' 'That's between the world and me. . . .'

Letters of the morning's post were brought in. The earl turned over a couple and took up a third, saying: 'I'll attend to you in two minutes,' and thinking once more: 'Queer world it is where, when you sheathe the sword, you have to be at play with bodkins.' Lady Charlotte gazed on the carpet, effervescent with retorts to his last observation, rightly conjecturing that the letter he selected to read was from 'his Aminta.'" The time seems endless to her before his reading is done. Lord Ormont's appearance is strange. "'No bad news, Rowsley?' The earl's breath fell heavily. Lady Charlotte left her chair and walked about the room. 'Rowsley, I'd like to hear if I can be of use.' 'Ma'am,' he said, and pondered on the word 'use,' staring at her. 'I don't intend to pry. I can't see my brother look like that and not ask.' The letter was tossed on the table to her." She read the lines dated from Felixstowe. It is final and it is long, dealing with details of administration and housekeeping, of drawers and labelled keys, and where the Ormont jewels have been left. "'The woman is cool,' Lady Charlotte ejaculates; and, 'will she be expecting you to answer, Rowsley?' 'Will that forked tongue cease hissing!' he shouted, in the agony of a strong man convulsed both to render and conceal the terrible, shameful, unexampled gush of tears. Lady Charlotte beheld her bleeding giant. She would rather have seen the brother of her love grimace in woman's manner than let loose those rolling big drops down the face of a rock. The big sob shook him, and she was shaken to dust by the sight. Now she was advised by her deep affection for her brother to sit patient and dumb behind shaded eyes. . . . Neither opened mouth when they separated. She pressed and kissed a large nerveless hand. Lord Ormont stood up to bow her forth. His ruddied skin



had gone to pallor, resembling the berg of ice on the edge of Arctic seas, when sunlight has fallen away from it." This crumbling of brother and sister, how touching, terrible, beautiful it is!

*One of Our Conquerors* is among the greatest of Meredith's novels, and is without doubt the most exasperating; his mania for analogy, metaphor, epigram, runs riot in it; the first half of the book is so difficult to penetrate that it is little a matter for surprise how few readers are familiar with the beauties contained in the second. Possibly, as was hinted in an earlier chapter, Meredith has attempted an impracticable task in treating Society—Public Opinion—as one of his characters; the innumerable host of the Radnors' visitors presents too many facets to be susceptible of a real synthesis by the reader. The difficulties inherent in the subject are increased by constant introduction of middle-distance characters, some of them, Colney Durance and Simeon Fenellan, worse than useless to the story; others, like Skepsey, Priscilla, and Mr. Pempton the clergyman, diverting its force by the undue space they occupy in it. Yet the book contains some of the most dramatic and moving scenes in the whole of Meredith's work, and, throughout, it is the most subtle study of social forces and their wrecking of the man who would at once ignore them and have them on his side.

"We are distracted, perverted, made strangers to ourselves by a false position"; this, of Nataly, is the keynote of the book. That fall of Victor's on London Bridge—the description of which has been a stumbling-block to many—sets us at once on the track of the central Idea of his character. How subtle is the would-be *bonhomie* of his recovery with its instant reinstatement of the Victor he knows, only to be overturned again mentally by sight of smudges on his waistcoat,

and by an artisan's misunderstanding of his character ! It epitomises his position to the world. The Radnors, we are to learn, "walk on a plank across chasms," but Victor's equilibrium is as a rule so successfully preserved, that he is wont to look on it as the pattern of stability in a world of fluctuations. It is impossible to miss the glamour of the man, spite of the fact that he is tricked out in Meredith's most obscuring vocabulary. In his actions and effect upon others, he is entirely convincing ; and he is finally drawn and put before us in his daughter's feeling of his charm, the inspiriting quality that rushes others, just as it rushes himself, past criticism or doubt : "There is no grasping of one who quickens us." Everything that Victor puts his hand to is successful ; wherever he is, he rises head and shoulders above his comrades. The error on which he is to be shipwrecked is of no obvious kind. "Victor had yet to learn that the man with a material object in aim is the man of his object ; and the nearer to his mark, often the further he is from a sober self : he is more the arrow to his bow than the bow to his arrow. This we pay for scheming : and success is costly ; we find we have pledged the better half of ourselves to clutch it ; not to be redeemed with the whole handful of our prize." "He is more the arrow to his bow than the bow to his arrow" ; could Victor's efficiency, covering everything except the essentials of the situation he is placed in, be better expressed than in that image ? He is one of Meredith's triumphs in creation.

The description of Nataly's attitude to Victor is also consummately successful. She does not dare analyse him, for that might be to condemn him and herself—the past through the present. "And if we are women, who commonly allow the lead to men, getting it for themselves only by snaky cunning or desperate adven-

ture, credulity—the continued trust in the man—is the alternative of despair.” That paints poor tortured Nataly’s position ; to escape despair she hoodwinks herself, perverts herself, and distracts herself. Meredith has never drawn a more wonderful picture of natural beauty and nobility thwarted, prostrated, twisted, and writhing ; beauty and nobility forced to a grimace of pain, and at last almost to ugliness, when she wildly suspects Nesta of not discriminating between herself and the world’s Mrs. Marsetts, and touches the worst abyss of false self-scorn. Nataly’s position towards Victor, towards Nesta, and towards the world, is the core of the book. The problem is felt mainly through her attitude towards it. With the exception of Chloe, she is the most lovable of Meredith’s women—as beautiful and fragile as a flower. Her author has said of her surrender to Victor : “ This might be likened to the detachment of a flower on the river’s bank by swell of flood : she had no longer root of her own ; away she sailed, through beautiful scenery, with occasionally a crashing fall, a turmoil, emergence from a vortex, and once more the sunny whirling surface ” ; and could the terror in her mind, running as an undercurrent to such sailing, be more completely expressed than in this sentence ? “ alarms, throbbing, suspicions, like those of old travellers through the haunted forest, where whispers have intensity of meaning, and unseeing we are seen, and unaware awaited.” The throb of Nataly’s breaking heart and the throb of Victor’s “ punctilio bump ” are the *leitmotifs* of the book ; the heart cracking at the end and the brain dissolving. One of the finest chapters is “ Nataly in Action,” a chapter which for beauty, pathos, insight, Meredith has hardly ever surpassed. Nataly’s dreamy, feminine thoughts above her anguish, in the train, her love of Dartrey sliding

insensibly from the maternal to the lover's, till she sees herself in Nesta's place, how beautiful they are! Apart from its subtlety of drama the chapter is full of exquisite description. After fainting, "unreflectingly, she tried her feet to support her, and tottered to the door, touched along to the stairs, and descended them, thinking strangely upon such a sudden weakness of body, when she would no longer have thought herself the weak woman." How we see her in that "touched along"! Again, "that doing of the right thing, after a term of paralysis, cowardice—any evil name—is one of the mighty reliefs, equal to happiness, of longer duration": and again, when she reaches the station where she is to meet Dudley Sowerby and perform her terrible task, "Slowness of motion brought her to the plain piece of work she had to do, on a colourless earth, that seemed foggy; but one could see one's way. Resolution is a form of light, our native light in this dubious world."

Nesta is less perfectly delineated. In all descriptions of her—smiling, singing, courageously upright, the "blue butterfly," or the Britomart, she is most charming, but she is apt to be tiresome in her talk. The episode of Mrs. Marsett is finely contrived to test Nesta and Nataly, to give poor Nataly's heart its most terrible twist ("It's the disease of a trouble to fly at comparisons"): but its significance is over-emphasised, and it is distasteful to see so genuine and attractive a girl as Nesta showily shoved up into the saddle of one of Meredith's hobbies. Her love for Dartrey Fenellan is beautiful, and the silent love scene between them is one of the love scenes of literature.

The book abounds in beauty and Meredith's best wisdom. Dudley Sowerby's mind, in the state of battle it presents after Nataly's communication, is admirably portrayed; "he had been educated in his family to



believe that the laws governing human institutions are divine—until History has altered them. They are altered to present a fresh bulwark against the infidel.” Was ever a more splendid landscape painted than in Victor’s vision of the Alps: “Lo, the Tyrolese limestone crags with livid peaks and snow lining shelves and veins of the crevices; and folds of pine-wood undulations closed by a shoulder of snow large on the blue; and a dazzling pinnacle rising over green pasture-Alps, the head of it shooting aloft as the blown billow, high off a broken ridge, and wide-armed in its pure white shroud beneath; tranced, but all motion in immobility, to the heart in the eye; a splendid image of striving, up to crowned victory.” And this, in another vein, is hardly less delightful: “We are indebted almost for construction to those who will define us briefly: we are but scattered leaves to the general comprehension of us until such a work of binding and labelling is done. And should the definition be not so correct as brevity pretends to make it at one stroke, we are at least rendered portable; thus we pass into the conceptions of our fellows, into the records, down to posterity.” Then there is the portrait of Mr. Barmby, a clerical aspirant to Nesta’s hand: “he was a worthy man, having within him the spiritual impulse curiously ready to take the place where a material disappointment left vacancy.” And of all these cameos the most beautiful, perhaps, is this of Dudley and Nesta: “One day, treating of modern Pessimism, he had draped a cadaverous view of our mortal being in a quotation of the wisdom of the Philosopher Emperor: ‘To set one’s love upon the swallow is a futility.’ And she, weighing it, nodded, and replied: ‘May not the pleasure for us remain if we set our love upon the beauty of the swallow’s flight?’” Meredith’s philosophy is in Nesta’s reply.



Almost every current of modern ethical theory is touched on in *One of our Conquerors*; teetotalism, vegetarianism, simplicity of life, the place of art in English society, the status of women ("it is undecided still whether they do of themselves conceive principles, or should submit to an imposition of the same upon them in terrorem"!), the Salvation Army and its effect on the masses<sup>1</sup>—these and innumerable other kindred topics are lengthily discussed. No one, in fact, who has not read the book can be fully aware of the keenness or of the scope of Meredith's interests. What may be urged against the book under this head is that it is a scrap-bag of reflections, reflections which the fact that they are Meredith's and among his best is not enough to unify. But its claim to greatness rests on a surer foundation. In the later chapters, at least, the story is developed with marvellous art. The subtlest vengeance social forces can take has been wreaked on the Radnors, when Nataly sees herself divided from her child and ranked on the side of convention. And in that closing scene, in the house where Nataly and Victor met, with its blue satin curtains, its gilt chairs, its Louis Quatorze clock, and Mrs. Berman dying in their midst, how supreme is the magic which reveals the vague, malevolent spectre that has hung over Nataly and Victor's life, as a woman who has had nothing but her craving for vengeance to go with her through the years!

<sup>1</sup> It may be of interest to note that *Jump-to-Glory Jane* appeared in the *Universal Review*, in 1890, the year previous to the publication of *One of our Conquerors*.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE AMAZING MARRIAGE

THIS, the latest of George Meredith's novels, in creative energy and vitality equals, if indeed it does not surpass, any of its predecessors. He has returned in it to his earlier and simpler manner, though the matter is as varied and complex as ever. The fire of *Sandra Belloni* unites with the subtlety of *The Egoist*, with the result that both are more humane: neither claims mastery; both are content to serve a single purpose. In matters of detail the old artifices are present; the first chapter is entitled "Dame Gossip as Chorus," and quotations are many from the old Buccaneer's "Maxims for Men." Moreover, the story does not really begin till the opening of the fourth chapter, when Chillon John and Carinthia set out from their home in Bavaria on a journey to England. Yet the previous chapters contain much in the way of meditation that most of us would be unwilling to spare; much too is suggested of the great-heartedness of the old Buccaneer and the valiant aristocracy of the woman he so tenderly loved, that contributes to our conception of their daughter Carinthia. Indeed, these prefatory chapters so strongly colour our view of the main situation, that we shall need to modify our instinctive criticism of the part Carinthia's husband plays in it, by the recollection that we have knowledge which he cannot share.

Where he thought confusedly of the Old Buccaneer as one who had outraged the laws of society and was therefore presumably of the undisciplined, the reader has been allowed clear view of one who "never had failed in an undertaking without stripping bare to expose himself where he had been wanting in Intention and Determination."

Carinthia has a mysterious kinship with the mountains and the dawn. We see her first on a twelve-foot leap from a window of her dark and dismantled home, going before daybreak with her brother to a mountain-top to renew their past in the childish game of "calling the morning." Nowhere else in his prose description has Meredith surpassed his picture of dawn as Carinthia and Chillon saw it that day; to the heroine of this, his last novel, he has lent his poet-vision at its intensest—the parallel with the *Hymn to Colour* being indeed curiously close: "Dawn in the mountain-land is a meeting of many friends. The pinnacle, the forest-head, the latschen-tufted mound, rock-bastion and defiant cliff and giant of the triple peak, were in view, clearly lined for a common recognition, but all were figures of solid gloom, unfeatured and bloomless. Another minute and they had flung off their mail and changed to various, indented, intricate, succinct in ridge, scar and channel; and they had all a look of watchfulness that made them one company. The smell of rock-waters and roots of herb and moss grew keen; air became a wine that raised the breast high to breathe it; an uplifting coolness pervaded the heights. . . . The plumes of cloud now slowly entered into the lofty arch of dawn and melted from brown to purple-black. The upper sky swam with violet; and in a moment each stray cloud-feather was edged with rose, and then suffused. It seemed that the heights fronted

East to eye the interflooding of colours, and it was imaginable that all turned to the giant whose forehead first kindled to the sun: a greeting of god and king. . . . The armies of the young sunrise in mountain-lands neighbouring the plains, vast shadows, were marching over woods and meads, black against the edge of golden; and great heights were cut with them, and bounding waters took the leap in a silvery radiance of gloom; the bright and dark-banded valleys were like night and morning taking hands down the sweep of their rivers. Immense was the range of vision scudding the peaks and over the illimitable Eastward plains flat to the very East and sources of the sun."

Changefulness of aspect is among the many subtle resemblances between Carinthia and her mountain home. Chillon, scrutinising her face for some warrant of her fortune, finds himself forced to the conclusion that she is plain, or at any rate unhandsome, though her features are expressive enough; "at times he had thought them marvellous, in the clear cut of the animating mind." Woodseer sees deeper, but his phrases—"A haggard Venus," "A beautiful Gorgon," are too neat and epigrammatic to serve as descriptions. He is happier in his less ambitious suggestions of a particular quality that comes and goes: "A panting look," "A look of beaten flame," "From minute to minute she is the rock that loses the sun at night and reddens in the morning." On his first meeting with Carinthia, Fleetwood finds good breeding and "something more than breeding" stamped on her features; Livia and Henrietta acknowledge, in calling her plain, that animation changes the character of her face. But it is among the greatest of tributes to Meredith's art that, without any direct statement on his part other than these half-hearted commendations of her contemporaries, his

readers are in no way astonished by Henrietta's account of Carinthia's appearance at the Ducal Ball at the Schloss. "Chillon, she was magical! you cannot ever have seen her irradiated with happiness. Her pleasure in the happiness of all around her was part of the charm. One should be a poet to describe her. It would task an artist to paint the rose-crystal she became when threading her way through the groups to be presented. This is not meant to say that she looked beautiful. It was the something above beauty—more unique and impressive—like the Alpine snow-cloak towering up from the flowery slopes you know so well and I a little." By the time age is reached loveliness of this quality will, to some extent at least, have stamped itself on the features: but in youth it comes and goes, flaming at its intensest in moments of stress, when a sudden and unaccustomed call is made upon action. It is part of the perfection of Meredith's workmanship in this matter that he never asks us to realise Carinthia's face in quiescence. The vision of her after her marriage lives for most of us in two scenes—her farewell to her husband on the day of her wedding, and her final conversation with him, a year or two later, in Wales. In the first, Fleetwood, who except on the top of the coach has not been alone with her since the ceremony in the church, comes to announce to Carinthia that he is leaving her for an indefinite period of time. She has had no preparation for his news; when he finds her in the inn sitting-room, "She was seated; neither crying, nor smiling, nor pointedly serious in any way, not conventionally at her ease either. . . . She spoke without offence, the simplest of words, affected no solitudes, put on no guilt smiles, wore no reproaches: spoke to him as if so it happened—he had necessarily a journey to perform. One could



see all the while big drops falling from the wound within. One could hear it in her voice. Imagine a crack of the string at the bow's deep stress. Or imagine the bow paralysed at the moment of the deepest sounding. And yet the voice did not waver. She had now the richness of tone carrying on a music through silence. . . . Her brown eyes were tearless, not alluring or beseeching or repelling ; they did but look, much like the skies opening high aloof on a wreck of storm. Her reddish hair—chestnut, if you will—let fall a skein over one of the rugged brows, and softened the ruggedness by making it wilder, as if a great bird were winging across a shoulder of the mountain ridges. No longer the chalk-quarry face,—its paleness now was that of night Alps beneath a moon chasing the shadows." To some, this suggestion of a whole by means of flickering images, half-defined, will seem the sole means by which Meredith could have achieved the end he had in view—that end being not the portrayal of something polished and complete, but the adumbration of a personality instinct with loveliness as yet unrealised. Others will complain of heaped and unrelated metaphor, by its very variety and inconstancy rendered meaningless. Of these it may fairly be demanded that they add to their recollection of what has been said of Meredith's use of metaphor in general a consideration of the particular task he has proposed to himself here. As, in his abstract treatment of life, he moves on the horizon of thought, sallying forth to identify some blurred and meaningless presence, and, by gleams flashing from hither and thither, set it, in poetry or prose, revealed to his fellows for the thing that it is, so in the heroine of his last novel he has given dramatic presentation and shape to an ideal of beauty, winged and transforming, which, while it hovered on the border-

land of our consciousness, had hitherto hovered uncaught.

While Chillon and Carinthia are crossing the mountains to Baden, Gower Woodseer and Lord Fleetwood, each baulked in his search for solitude, are making friends on the shores of the neighbouring lake. Fleetwood is tied to the district by the presence of the beautiful Henrietta Fakenham, of whose devotion to Chillon Carinthia, by a sight of her portrait and letters, has already been assured. On the relationship of this strangely assorted pair, "the young man who fancied he had robed himself in the plain homespun of a natural philosopher at the age of twenty-three," and the young lord who "was not by nature a dreamer, only dreamed of the luxury of being one," Meredith's subtlest powers have been exercised. There is much in common in their temperaments; and circumstance supplies the contrast that provides their relation with the piquancy they require of it. Readers of *The Empty Purse* will not find it difficult from the outset to predict that, of the two theorists, he who replies to the wealthy Lord Fleetwood's—"May I ask which of the Universities?"—with a panegyric of his schooling on the Open Road, and the statement—"I have studied in myself the old animal having his head pushed into the collar to earn a feed of corn"—will be the earliest to "strike earth" and effectiveness. But even though the final harbourage of his nature is foreseen, there are hints from the first that Woodseer's impressionable personality will be involved in back-eddies and tides, before anchorage is secured. On the threshold, Meredith's old danger signal is hung out. Woodseer's insight is real, his penetration undoubted, but he labours under the disadvantage common to men who have developed amongst their intellectual inferiors. Having evolved certain theories of life on

his own account, he is unable to hold them with sufficient relativity, or to grasp the complexity of the interests against which he inveighs. Dragons that have power to slay strong men, he imagines, may be dismissed in an epigram. His philosophy cries scorn at the thought of any possible allurements in the green tables at Baden, or submission to a personal attraction not based on reason and mental similarity. In consequence, before he turns from the tables, the purse of another as well as his own is emptied, and in submission to Livia's fascination he betrays the trust of a dying man, and is forced to realise that—"indeed below the roadway of ordinary principles hedged with dull texts, he had strangely fallen." Meredith comments characteristically on the somewhat lofty tone in which Woodseer explains that, being without money to lose or inclination to gain, he is free of all temptation to gamble. "They were no doubt good reasons and they were grand morality. They were at the same time customary phrases of the unfleshed in folly." Equally characteristic is his comment at the moment previous to Woodseer's submission to Livia's temptation. "Not only is he no philosopher who has an idol, he has to learn that he cannot think rationally; his due sense of weight and measure is lost, the choice of his thoughts as well."

When Fleetwood and Woodseer meet for the first time, they are led to a ready mutual understanding by the fact that Fleetwood has found Woodseer's notebook lying open on an inn bench and read it through. The latest entries refer to the writer's glimpse of Carinthia, and Woodseer finds himself amazed at Fleetwood's power of visualisation on the meagre basis they afford. A more experienced person would have perceived the young lord's malady, recognised that "here was one bitten by the serpent of love, and athirst for an image of

the sex to serve as a cooling herb"; but Woodseer attributes the sympathy to a curious imaginative fellowship between himself and Fleetwood, and proceeds to talk of Carinthia more and more in the abstract. A difference of opinion between them as to the title—whether "girl" or "gorgon"—by which she can best be described, induces coolness and even some danger of a quarrel. In a common determination to sleep near the mountain-top, and to avoid the city, their friendship to some extent is renewed; but it is with a reserve. On the point under dispute neither is prepared to give way. For in their differing positions, and with differing possibilities of exercising the tendency, the temper of both is tyrannical. Up to this point and for some time after, notably in his visit to the tailor at Carlsruhe, his escapade at the gaming-table, and his adoration of the Countess Livia, Woodseer shows as Lord Fleetwood's inferior—in abstract intellectuality his equal, but from lack of experience his inferior in action. Why, and at what point, then, we may ask, does the young Welshman overtake and begin to outstrip his friend? Half through the book, Fleetwood himself is astounded to realise that, instead of idolising the Countess Livia, Woodseer is now her master, and has not the smallest desire to fall in with his lordship's scheme for their marriage; that, in fact, he has asked and won the love of Carinthia's waiting-maid and friend, a girl in many points closely resembling her mistress; and, though Fleetwood possesses the grace and insight to recognise progress in these changes, he is a good deal at a loss to understand how they occurred. For the reader who has looked into Woodseer's mind, explanations are not far to seek. The development, as already suggested, is partially attributable to his circumstances, the fact that he is not walled off by wealth from the realities of life; but beyond



this he has an advantage the reverse side of which has already been stated. He has been seen, from lack of social knowledge and experience, to take his own convictions somewhat too seriously, but they were genuine convictions worthy the name. He has not toyed with his intellect or learned to divorce his thoughts from his action. It was inevitable that his inexperience should be overpowered by Livia's fascination and beauty, inevitable perhaps that at first he should succumb to any temptation she coupled with intimacy and mutual understanding. What was not inevitable, what is in fact peculiar to himself and his kind, "men with a passion for spiritual cleanliness," was his power of recognising, immediately and unprompted, the nature of the deed he had done. He hears his father speculating as to the conduct of Carinthia's husband and responds to his demand, "Can you imagine the doing of an injury by a man to a woman like her?" "Yes, I can imagine it, I'm doing it myself. I shall be doing it till I've written a letter and paid a visit." The confession made, "He took a meditative stride or two in the room, thinking without revulsion of the Countess Livia under a similitude of the bell of the plant henbane, and that his father had immunity from temptation because of the insensibility to beauty. Out of which he passed to the writing of the letter to Lord Fleetwood, informing his lordship that he intended immediately to deliver a message to the Marchioness of Arpington from Admiral Baldwin Fakenham, in relation to the Countess of Fleetwood. A duty was easily done by Woodseer when he had surmounted the task of conceiving his resolution to do it; and this task, involving an offence to the Lady Livia and intrusion of his name on a nobleman's recollection, ranked next in severity to the chopping off of his fingers by a man suspecting them of the bite of rabies."



Courage certainly would be required for such an amputation; but when it is remembered that the amputator in this case acknowledged no bite, knew only of what he had hitherto supposed was a life-giving experience, the insight that went to his diagnosis and instant detection of poison is felt to be rarer.

Fleetwood's errors are subtler, as his circumstances are more involved. Like Woodseer, and almost every one else in the book worth speaking to, he is partially Welsh. What this involves, Meredith, here and elsewhere, has been at some pains to inform us. During Victor Radnor's concert in *One of Our Conquerors*, a German visitor listens to comments that cause him to ask whether the English care in the least for music, or indeed for anything other than material good. Meredith replies to the question in person. They care, he says, more than appears; moreover, in speaking of them as a nation, it should be realised how largely in matters of Art the whole is now leavened and inspirited by the Welsh, Irish, and Scotch. In *Sandra Belloni* pride in his race is more ardently and less temperately expressed. He alludes to "peculiar Welsh delicacy," and says: "All subtle feelings are discovered by Welsh eyes when untroubled by any mental agitation. Brother and sister were Welsh, and I may observe that there is human nature and Welsh nature." In reference to Woodseer and Fleetwood, he reminds us that a Welshman is excitable, ready at all times to start on a quest, a wild-goose chase even, but that, though his quarry may be vague and immaterial to the eyes of his neighbours, it will be clear to his own. Unlike the Teuton, the Welshman, we are told, never kindles the fire of his present on the ashes of his past. Loved or hated, that which once has been lives animate behind the shroud, quick at a word, a scent, a sound, to re-

assert itself in the present. This last trait gives us the key to much that is puzzling in Fleetwood's career. For in many natures at war with themselves it is a characteristic of their want of unity to be able to think and act in their best moments in forgetfulness of their worst. But Fleetwood is dogged throughout by memories of actions so alien to his feeling in the present, seemingly so little emanations of himself, that he sinks back on the idea of fatality. He is roused to a peculiarly keen consciousness of this in the scene where he parts from his wife by the graveyard of the very church in which they had been married. After long separation he comes to the house he has apportioned her, determined, whatever it may cost him, to arrive at some understanding. Hearing he is to come, she goes to stay with some friends who live near by. He accompanies her in the late afternoon on her walk to their house. "Up the lane by the park they had open lands to the heights of Croridge. 'Splendid clouds,' Fleetwood remarked. She looked up, thinking of the happy long day's walk with her brother to the Styrian Baths. Pleasure in the sight made her face shine superbly. 'A flying Switzerland, Mr. Woodseer says,' she replied; 'England is beautiful on days like these. For walking, I think the English climate very good.' He dropped a murmur: 'It should suit so good a walker,' and burned to compliment her spirited easy stepping, and scorned himself for the sycophancy it would be before they were on the common ground of a restored understanding. But an approval of any of her acts threatened him with enthusiasm for the whole of them, her person included; and a dam in his breast had to keep back the flood. 'You quote Woodseer to me, Carinthia. I wish you knew Lord Feltre. He can tell you of every cathedral, convent, and monastery in

Europe and Syria. Nature is well enough ; she is, as he says, a savage. Men's works, acting under divine direction to escape from that tangle, are better worthy of study, perhaps. If one has done wrong, for example.' 'I could listen to him,' she said. 'You would not need—except, yes, one thing. Your father's book speaks of not forgiving an injury.' 'My father does. He thinks it weakness to forgive an injury. Women do, and they are disgraced, they are thought slavish. My brother is much stronger than I am. He is my father alive in that.' 'It is anti-Christian, some would think.' 'Let offending people go. He would not punish them. They may go where they will be forgiven. For them our religion is a happy retreat : we are glad they have it. My father and my brother say that injury forbids us to be friends again. My father was injured by the English Admiralty : he never forgave it ; but he would have fought one of their ships and offered his blood any day, if his country called to battle. . . .' The dwarf tower of Croridge village church fronted them against the sky, seen of both. 'You remember it,' he said. And she answered : 'I was married there.' 'You have not forgotten that injury, Carinthia?' 'I am a mother.' 'By all the saints! you hit hard. Justly. Not you. Our deeds are the hard hitters. We learn when they begin to flagellate, stroke upon stroke! Suppose we hold a costly thing in the hand and dash it to the ground—no recovering of it, none! That must be what your father meant. I can't regret you are a mother. We have a son, a bond. How can I describe the man I was!' he muttered,—'possessed! sort of werewolf! You are my wife?' 'I was married to you, my lord.' 'It's a tie of a kind.' 'It binds me.' 'Obey, you said.' 'Obey *it*. I do.' 'You consider it holy?' 'My father and mother spoke to me of the

marriage-tie. I read the service before I stood at the altar. It is holy. It is dreadful. I will be true to it.' 'To your husband?' 'To his name, to his honour.' 'To the vow to live with him?' 'My husband broke that for me.' 'Carinthia, if he bids you, begs you to renew it? God knows what you may save me from.' 'Pray to God. Do not beg of me, my lord. I have my brother and my little son. No more of husband for me! God has given me a friend, too,—a man of humble heart, my brother's friend, my dear Rebecca's husband. He can take them from me: no one but God. See the splendid sky we have.' With those words she barred the gates on him; at the same time she bestowed the frank look of an amiable face brilliant in the lively red of her exercise, in its bent-bow curve along the forehead, out of the line of beauty, touching, as her voice was, to make an undertone of anguish swell an ecstasy. So he felt it, for his mood was now the lover's. A torture smote him, to find himself transported by that voice at his ear to the scene of the young bride in thirty-acre meadow. 'I propose to call on Captain Kirby-Levellier to-morrow, Carinthia,' he said. 'The name of the house?' 'My brother is not now any more in the English army,' she replied. 'He has hired a furnished house named Stoneridge.' 'He will receive me, I presume?' 'My brother is a courteous gentleman, my lord.' 'Here is the church, and here we have to part for to-day. Do we?' 'Good-bye to you, my lord,' she said. He took her hand and dropped the dead thing. 'Your idea is, to return to Esslemont some day or other?' 'For the present,' was her strange answer. She bowed, she stepped on. On she sped, leaving him at the stammered beginning of his appeal to her. Their parting by the graveyard of the church that had united them was what the world would class

as curious. To him it was a further and a well-marked stroke of the fatality pursuing him. He sauntered by the graveyard wall until her figure slipped out of sight. It went like a puffed candle, and still it haunted the corner where last seen. Her vanishing seemed to say, that less of her belonged to him than the phantom his eyes retained behind them somewhere." Standing by the wall of the graveyard till Carinthia is out of sight, Fleetwood finds himself fingering a pocket-pistol he has begged from the relative of one of his satellites, who lately used it to speed himself to the unknown. He gazes on tombstones duller than those of Feltre's communion, but none the less marking the resting-places of men released from the strife. He reflects that, if this church were Roman, it would be possible to enter and cleanse the stained soul in confession. The path to which the Romanist is pointing meanders across the horizon; he says, two sexes created at war with each other must abjure their sex before they can be at peace. Woodseer, on the other hand, is for regaining—outside the Church—the right to be numbered among the world's fighting men, "the *act* penitential—youth put behind us, the steady course ahead." The ideas conflict, but Fleetwood's friendship for both men is sincere, and consequently he is waking, between the two of them, to the claims of others, "youth's infant conscience." With the rest of his intimates, and especially in his relation to women, he has been handicapped by his wealth. Having been, as Henrietta exclaims, "accustomed to buy men and women," he early lost faith in their ingenuousness.

Since the day of his meeting with Woodseer in the Bavarian highlands, he has travelled fast and far. His whimsical feeling for Carinthia darkened to bitterness almost before their engagement, and from the morning



of their marriage they never met again, overtly, till the struggle between them began. In this struggle he has had real cause for complaint, for Carinthia has been strangely unimaginative. He begins to suspect that she is not aware of the degree in which she was thrust on her lord; none the less, by her unsolicited championship and pursuance of her husband she has placed him in situations so ridiculous that any man with a keen social sense must have found them difficult to forget and forgive. For the long neglect, and the kidnapping, and for an offence deeper and darker than these, Carinthia's pardon has to be sought. And now Fleetwood's love has developed, the reader is forced to recognise that his feeling is more subtle and, in some ways, too delicate for that of his wife. In fact, given the main outlines of character, whimsical subtlety and sensitiveness on one side, and heroic simplicity and literalness on the other, the situation is comprehensible enough. But what Fleetwood failed to grasp till too late, and what goes far to justify Carinthia's unimaginativeness, is the heroic scale on which her nature is built. Devoid of subtlety of perception, it is devoid also of small-mindedness or shadow of turning. She has nothing in common with the familiar type of character which disclaims attention to other people's foibles while demanding excessive sympathy for its own. In her unquestioning acceptance of Fleetwood's silence and inaction from the night of the Ball till the day of their wedding there is foolishness certainly, but there is also a grandeur, outlining and mirroring her own conception of constancy, that gives her rank with the greatest. To every woman worthy the name a passionate love lends some access of single-mindedness and courage; to such as Carinthia and Nesta, in whose hearts these virtues are native, there can in love's presence be no counting of

costs. "They sink back upon no breast of love"; they grasp at a flaming sword, but—a sword, and no plaything—its work may be to carve the way out of a fool's paradise; and if he was a mock-hero who was the bringer of it, there will be no escape for him from the ordeal of the uplifted blade.

Mere reaction of feeling is hasty, but change embracing the whole of a character is slow. It is, for Meredith, an integral part of Carinthia's greatness that she should move to her final position step by step and unwillingly. Overleaping of fences is not Carinthia's title to consideration any more than it is Nesta's or Aminta's; the qualities of all three are stable and independent of circumstance. The difference between a wise man and a fool seems to lie less in the smaller number of mistakes made by the former, than in the fact that he does not fall into the same mistakes twice over. Is it not impossible to conceive of Nataly or Countess Fanny, Aminta or Carinthia, as repeating their experiences? In every case, indeed, the exact reverse is stated of them. Their freedom is achieved as a means to an end. And in this—the fact that their quest is for righteousness and wisdom, not for any renewal of sensation, however exalted—is the secret of what Mr. Le Gallienne has termed "a certain coldness about these young Dianas," the secret also of their peculiar and permanent beauty.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE SHORT STORIES

*THE House on the Beach*, *The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper*, and *The Tale of Chloe*, all now included with *Farina* in one volume under the title of *Short Stories*, appeared in the *New Quarterly Magazine* for January, 1877, July, 1877, and July, 1879, respectively. That is, they belong to the period which produced *The Essay on Comedy*; and, in subtlety of thought and delicacy of workmanship, they are not far from its level. The stories appear at first sight readily divisible into comic and tragic, but on further acquaintance they prove less easy to classify. Relatively to the profoundly tragic *Tale of Chloe*, the other two stories are certainly comedy; but in *The House on the Beach*, at any rate, the loftier muse follows close in her sister's wake. The intermingling of laughter and tears in this story is only to be fully appreciated in view of the coarseness of instrument from which such gradation of tone is obtained; for *The House on the Beach* is a study of lower middle-class persons in a lower middle-class setting. Tinman, its central character, is the mean-minded ex-tradesman, but now socially aspiring Bailiff, of the Cinque Port of Crikswich. He is almost without a redeeming quality, and, in strains of the mock-heroic well suited to his pretensions, Meredith plays with him as a cat plays with a mouse. He is revealed as even

more sordid than his surroundings, though we are told in reference to his house on the beach, "Sea delighted it not, nor land either. Marine Parade fronting it to the left, shaded sickly eyes under a worn, green verandah from a sun that rarely appeared, as the traducers of spinsters pretend those virgins are ever keenly on their guard against him that cometh not. Belle Vue Terrace stared out of lank glass panes without reserve, unashamed of its yellow complexion. A gaping public-house, calling itself newly hotel, fell backward a step. Villas with the titles of royalty and bloody battles claimed five feet of garden, and swelled in bow windows beside other villas which drew up firmly, commending to the attention a decent straightness and unintrusive decorum in preference. . . . Shavenness, featurelessness, emptiness, clamminess, scurfiness, formed the outward expression of a town to which people were reasonably glad to come from London in summer-time, for there was nothing in Crikswich to distract the naked pursuit of health." Tinman, at the time of his friend Van Diemen Smith's return from Australia, is absorbed in a scheme for taking advantage of his official position as bailiff of Crikswich to present a congratulatory address to the Queen on the occasion of the marriage of one of her daughters. To this end he attitudinises daily in a court suit before the glass. And Van Diemen Smith, arriving at Crikswich late in the evening, walks into a hired mirror which, on account of its unsatisfactory powers of reflection, is being moved out of Tinman's house and returned to its owner.

Van Diemen is large-minded and warm-hearted in character. It is strange to think that there can ever have been a genuine relationship between him and Tinman. But he has been long in Australia, and in these years his passionate attachment to the land of his

birth has wound itself inextricably with the thought of the only acquaintance that remains to him there. Moreover, Tinman's existence has enabled him partially to explain to himself his craving for England. Van Diemen arrives. He has wealth and a daughter. He has, moreover, a secret known to Tinman. Tinman covets his daughter and his wealth, and uses his knowledge of the secret as a means to secure them. Van Diemen's extraordinary clinging to belief in Tinman, in the face of these developments, is due, partly, to the tendency of a frank and generous nature to credit others with its own qualities, but even more to the fact that the "crime" of his youth remains on his nerves—he will not look it in the face. Terror of it, and its penalties, is the under side of the quality by means of which he retains his affection for Tinman. But this trait in Van Diemen's character—this heroic tenacity of grip on things as they were in the past—is harmonious with the life he has lived. He has been where men are absorbed in wrestling with nature for necessities and there is little or no field for the exercise of imagination on subtleties of civilisation or character. Sentiment, moreover, tends to stereotype in the exile's mind the features of the England he last looked on. Most of Van Diemen's life has been spent in Australia, and his mixture of elementary emotion and unusual good sense is part of the present colonial equipment. The broad humour of a situation which places the giant-like Van Diemen in the hands of a pigmy is visible plainly enough, but Meredith would have us realise that there is material for tragedy too. And this lies in Van Diemen's unintellectualised power of feeling. Vulnerable at one point only, his obsession on this point brings him within sight of a genuine crime; under sway of his nerves, he comes very near to delivering his daughter over to Tinman.



The tragedy is averted, and a true lover's way made plain, by a furious gale which engulfs the house on the beach. Tinman feels his house rocking on the night of the outburst, and, terrified for his property and stung by non-success in his pursuit of Annette, he writes and addresses to the military authorities his long-threatened charge against Van Diemen. The task is accomplished, but sleep is impossible; "black night favoured the tearing fiends of shipwreck." To distract himself from the terrors of the storm, he goes to his wardrobe and draws out his suit. He puts it on, and his mind plays round memories of the great occasion on which he wore it, till he is sheltered from thought of the tempest in imagination of the day of his splendour. He wraps himself in his dressing-gown, lies down, and sleeps. When he wakes the next morning, waves crash through his house, its walls are falling, and he is cut off from the land. This material embodiment of the spiritual forces which have long battered against Tinman's delusions and falseness is eminently characteristic of Meredith's method. His matter may be whimsical or even fantastic, but the angle at which it is set ensures certain lights falling upon it. Crikswich may occupy the centre of the stage, but round and about it is the sea.

Of *The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper*, it is sufficient to say that it is, perhaps, the flower of Meredith's humour, and that it gives the main tenets of its author's philosophy in miniature. The exquisite humour of the tale lies in Lady Camper's compulsion of General Ople from sins of omission to those of commission, the swiftness with which she drives him along the lines of his tendencies to their goal. And the subtlety with which the General's self-stripping is contrived may be judged from the opening of the second chapter, where Meredith, while apparently deprecating

the gibbeting of his hero, recalls in the ebb of his sentence almost as much as he concedes in its flow. "General Ople was modest, retiring: humbly contented; a gentlemanly residence appeased his ambition." "He was one of us; no worse, and not strikingly or perilously better; and he could not but feel, in the bitterness of his reflections upon an inexplicable destiny, that the punishment befalling him, unmerited as it was, looked like absence of Design in the scheme of things Above."

It is, however, in *The Tale of Chloe* that the high-water mark of these short stories is reached. The beginning of the tale is not easy reading, but as a whole it is perfected artistically in a way very rare in Meredith's work. Chloe's character is one of the profoundest of Meredith's creations, the subtlety and intensity of its conception being the more wonderful for its slightness of outline. The scene of the story is an eighteenth-century health-resort, presided over by a certain Mr. Beamish, "our first, if not only, philosophical beau," who by rigid laws and conventions raises the manners of the society under his care to an unusual pitch of decorum. Beamish undertakes, for a month, responsibility for the rustic girl-wife of a middle-aged duke, whom her husband desires to see something of the fashionable world without running the least risk of contamination. Beamish has no fear of not being able to meet the conditions, and he welcomes the Duchess Susan, and provides as her personal attendant a lady of good birth, who is known as Chloe. The confidence Mr. Beamish reposes in Chloe is almost unlimited. Years ago she sacrificed the whole of her estate to a faithless lover, and since his departure she has lived penniless at the Wells. She has "died for love," and where love is concerned she is "a ghost, an

apparition, a taper." Yet her spirit is the flame of the Wells; she has heart for all its affairs—"the wit and sprightliness of Chloe were so famous as to be considered medical. She was besieged for her company: she composed and sang impromptu verses, she played harp and harpsicord divinely, and touched the guitar and danced—danced like the silvery moon on the waters of the mill-pool." She is a perpetual cordial, and, though the outline of her story is known, no one dreams of pitying her. The strength of her love in the past is revealed to us in the uncrippled rising of her spirit above the wreck of her hopes. A fountain of good to her comrades, in the midst of her last bitter ordeal she appears "as the gayest of them that draw breath for the day and have pulses for the morrow." Superior to the frailties common around her, Chloe is yet throbbing with every pulse of humanity; she is so simply and warmly human that even Susan has only rare glimpses of something that overawes. Romantic and rational, solitary and social, indomitable in purpose, Chloe has won to her marvellous insight through feeling so sword-edged and keen that it has pierced every obstruction. The rarity of her nature lies in its combination of exquisite and invigorating vitality with singular aloofness of spirit—"she became the comrade of men without forfeit of her station among sage sweet ladies . . . she seemed her sex's deputy, to tell the coarser where they should meet, as on a bridge above the torrent separating them, gaily for interchange of the best of either, unfired and untempted by fire, yet with all the elements which make fire burn to animate their hearts."

The Duchess Susan is of good heart and practical common sense, but she is rebellious against the rules of the Wells and "all for nature," as promising most en-

joyment. She puts her intelligence to sleep, and relies on Chloe for the alarm. She has no mind to exchange her glowing material charms and her blushes "to be the light which leads . . . to don the misty vesture of an idea . . . very powerful but abstruse, unseizable." Caseldy, Chloe's faithless lover, returns to the Wells, not, as Mr. Beamish and others suppose, to claim Chloe, but in pursuit of the Duchess Susan. Chloe, from the first moment, sees how matters stand, but her love for Caseldy is intense, and she allows herself one month of "strongly-willed delusion," increasing her care of her charge, though never allowing Susan or any one else to be aware of her solicitude; never failing in affectionate warmth to Susan or in gentleness to Caseldy, and breaking out into scorn of Mr. Camwell, her ardent young lover, when he dares to put the facts she knows into words, and inform her of arrangements for Susan's elopement with Caseldy.

Chloe's knowledge of every plan and counter-plan, her resolved suicide, her conquest of personal suffering, endow her with an almost unearthly serenity—"everything assured her that she saw more clearly than others; she saw when it was good to cease to live." Her imagination enables her to sympathise with the woman who supplants her and the man who deceives. "She made her tragic humility speak thankfully to the wound that slew her. 'Had it not been so, I should not have seen him,' she said. Her lover would not have come to her but for his pursuit of another woman. She pardoned him for being attracted by that beautiful transplant of the fields: pardoned her likewise. 'He, when I saw him first, was as beautiful to me. For him I might have done as much.'" There is no smallest taint of rivalry in Chloe's decision to die; she vows herself to her course to save a younger woman from

ruin. "Far away in a lighted hall of the West, her family raised hands of reproach. They were minute objects, keenly discerned as diminished figures cut in steel. Feeling could not be very warm for them, they were so small, and a sea that had drowned her ran between; and looking that way she had scarce any warmth of feeling save for a white *rhaiadr* leaping out of broken cloud through blanched rocks, where she had climbed and dreamed when a child. The dream was then of the coloured days to come; now she was more infant in her mind, and she watched the scattered water broaden, and tasted the spray, sat there drinking the scene, untroubled by hopes as a lamb, different only from an infant in knowing she had thrown off life to travel back to her home and be refreshed. She heard her people talk; they were unending babblers in the water-fall. Truth was with them, and wisdom. How, then, could she pretend to any right to live?" In this, Chloe's farewell to earth, the delicate atmosphere of detachment which pervades the whole of the story is wrought to perfection. The artificialities surrounding the drama, the smallness of its stage, are used with consummate art to make it more poignant. That group of tiny figures waving impotent arms in the West is clear and afar, actual and remote, as a scene in some ancient metal reflector.



## CHAPTER XXII

### MINOR CHARACTERISTICS AND CONCLUSION

MEN, who, by the abundance of their power and by their habit of concentrating it upon the leading issues of life, have attained to something of a superhuman stature, are seldom deficient in redeeming human weaknesses, partialities not based upon the sterner dictates of reason, but to be viewed rather as flowers of the illogical affections, creatures of mere casual association. Except to their possessors they are of little value in themselves; for they are accidental; but they have a derivative value, both as being the accidents of greatness and as providing lesser minds with a certain assurance of community; tending thus to bring the larger achievement into range with more normal effort; showing it not merely colossal but of tried, determinate proportion, a feat which the common man may do something more than gape at; from which—since flesh and blood like his own have accomplished it—he may at least learn method, if he cannot hope to show rivalry in his results. Meredith's nature abounds in these lovable and sometimes illogical partialities, and his work is the more charming that he has made little effort to conceal them. A book might easily be written upon the inessentials, the by-products, of his genius; for his main stream of purpose is perpetually in flood, perpetually overflowing and ready to dance away and to seek delight and give it along the narrower

side-channels of life and thought. The present chapter aims at indicating a few of these side-channels, and may set the reader whom they interest upon the track of others.

Like the poet of an earlier day, Meredith has a word of high praise for water. The cart-horse at the roadside trough appeals to an instinctive sympathy in him with the whole human family and with simple shareable desires: "Well-spring is common ground."<sup>1</sup> But, like the same earlier poet, he adds a qualifying particle to his praise. "Water," he says, "*on the one hand*, is best." There is, on the other hand, a further consideration, to consult which is to find that wine is better. Meredith's wine chapters are so famous that it is enough, here, to have named them. Alvan and Clotilde rise to one of their highest peaks of rapture in adoration of the national "grape-juice," and the final compliment to Diana is, that, though a woman, she can distinguish a good from an inferior vintage and gives her guests the good. In a teetotal and a democratic age we may best secure sympathy for the intricacies and comicalities of Meredith's wine-worship by pointing to the root of it in his deep-seated aristocracy of sentiment.

To deal with partialities is, as has been suggested, to deal with the disconnected and illogical; and this being the nature of our subject, we must rely upon the reader's leniency if a want of method appears in our treatment of it. Whether it were best to pass from wine to a consideration of the elaborate and sometimes surely rather over-stimulated wits—wits of brilliant ladies or cynical epicureans, or of the hundred other articles of human jewellery that flash over our author's pages—or, turning to more natural sources of invigoration, to speak of Meredith's peculiar feeling for the south-west wind, is

<sup>1</sup> *Melampus*.

a problem for solution of which there seems no principle to be found.

Not long the silence followed :  
The voice that issues from thy breast,  
O glorious South-west,  
Along the gloom-horizon holloa'd ;  
Warming the valleys with a mellow roar  
Through flapping wings ;<sup>1</sup>

Meredith's devotion to the south-west wind is due, first, to the fact that we have so much of it, that it is the determinant feature of our English climate. Redworth, in *Diana of the Crossways*, says that if you consult the old calendars you may find they give south-west weather an average of seven months in the year. This to Meredith would alone be a sufficient ground for friendliness. But the manly strength of the south-west, its womanly variableness, the perennial freshness that accompanies it in earth and sky, are the qualities that most endear it to him, and his delight in them may be traced from the first of his novels to the last. When the south-west is blowing Meredith tells you the time by consulting the heavens, not his watch : " They passed out of Esslemont gates together at that hour of the late afternoon when south-westerly breezes, after a summer gale, drive their huge white flocks over blue fields fresh as morning, on the march to pile the crown of the sphere, and end a troubled day with grandeur." It is from *The Amazing Marriage* ; and here, from *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, is his description of that grandeur in which the trouble ends. " The wind had dropped. The clouds had rolled from the zenith, and ranged in amphitheatre with distant flushed bodies over sea and land : Titanic crimson head and chest rising from the wave faced Hyperion falling. There hung Briareus with deep-indented trunk and ravined brows, stretching

<sup>1</sup> *Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn.*

all his hands up to unattainable blue summits. Northwest the range had a rich white glow, as if shining to the moon, and westward, streams of amber, melting into upper rose, shot out from the dipping disk."

This last, in the close parallel it affords with one of the most noteworthy passages in Meredith's *South-Wester*, suggests another of our author's characteristics. He has no scruple about using the same impression more than once. Indeed, what cause of scruple could there be where the impressionable surface is so vast? At the same time the manner of rehearsal, as pre-eminently in the case just referred to, is often close enough to be interesting. That remarkable expression in the *Hymn to Colour*, "We came where woods breathed sharp," is recollected from *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, and the equally remarkable expression which immediately succeeds it in the Hymn echoes a passage in *Farina*. "Bright with maiden splendour shone the moon, and the old rocks, cherished in her beams, put up their horns to blue heaven once more." No one well acquainted with the novels can read the poems without feeling that they are describable, in one aspect, as the novels themselves in distillation. Who doubts that *Love in the Valley* was composed by Richard for Lucy, or that the nightingales singing in that marvellous *Night of Frost in May* are the same as those with which Emilia matched herself? That there would be a poem on walking, and a tribute therein to the sweetening influences of that exercise, no prophet would have been needed to predict; though wonder might well have arisen as to why Meredith kept the world so long waiting for it.<sup>1</sup> The same prediction would probably have included swimming, yachting, climbing; and certainly it is strange that they do not

<sup>1</sup> *The Night Walk*; published with *A Reading of Life*, 1901.

upy more prominent places in the poems than they  
10. That the *Hymn to Colour* is a hymn not of dawn only, but dawn among the mountains, is felt in the spirit of it, though the mountains themselves are only once directly spoken of. *The Last Contention* is enough in itself to show Meredith's intimacy with shipping and the sea, and one may have heard of readers who took it as the description of an incident at the regatta. As to swimming, the climax of *Lord Ormont* has all the poetry of it, and where was the need for versification? Swimming is a type of pure pleasure to Meredith, the pleasure which can combine the sanity so desirable in our pleasures with that so necessary delirium!

Enter these enchanted woods,  
You who dare.  
Nothing harms beneath the leaves  
More than waves a swimmer cleaves.<sup>1</sup>

When the pleasures, like waves to a swimmer,  
Come heaving for rapture ahead.<sup>2</sup>

In the novels there is a tendency to overwork the image. Nothing could be apter than Clara Middleton's dive in view of the looming breaker of Willoughby's embrace. Our allusion naturally is not to metaphorical masterpieces of this calibre, but to the more obvious parallelisms for which the simple word is pressed into service wherever a gliding buoyancy is to be conveyed. That bold and beautiful expression near the close of *Love in the Valley* is unassailable in itself; the only criticism it is open to is that its author has given us too many associations that clash with it. If the image of your lady is to 'swim' to you, while your tears flow, it seems a pity that the smell of hot meats at your banquet should be permitted to do the same. But to

<sup>1</sup> *The Woods of Westermain.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ode to Youth in Memory.*



revert; swimming, yachting, climbing, walking, are certainly Meredith's main hobbies, and, to hazard a conjecture, we should say that they were recommended to him by the opportunity they offer for immediate contact with, and strife against, the elements. They enable a man to take stock of his strength, and to gain the inspiration and the thews of the fighter from the instinctive pleasure he feels in meeting an opposing force and overcoming it.

His breath of instant thirst  
Is warning of a creature matched with strife,  
To meet it as a Bride——<sup>1</sup>

The particularity of Meredith's nature study has been noted elsewhere. So keen an observer has, of course, his favourite birds and flowers. Among the former, lark, thrush and nightingale need not be more than named; the tits come in for a fair share of attention; and among less common species one or two recur in characteristic attitudes: the nightjar is generally to be seen sitting on a pine-branch with a star over his head, and the great green woodpecker is snapshotted as he breaks from cover, uttering his melodious cry. Among flowers, after that of the wild cherry tree, the first place must be given to the pale purple crocus. Its earliest appearance is in *Farina*, when Margarita wears it, the bell downward, in her hair; and both in *Diana of the Crossways* and *The Amazing Marriage*, Meredith makes allusion to the beauty of its effect in mass. Carinthia, standing with Chillon in the marvellous dawn of that morning farewell to their home, sees "straight-grown flocks of naked, purple crocuses in bud and blow abounding over the meadow that rolled to the level of the house; and two of these she gathered." Proper

<sup>1</sup> *Earth and Man*.

appreciation of the flower, and, Diana would add, of wild flowers in general, necessitates this temperance in the matter of picking them. It is a different crocus, but still a crocus, which, at the end of *The Thrush in February*, provides Meredith with one of the most perfect images in the whole range of his poetry.

We turn from a minor to what must certainly be considered nearer to a major characteristic of our author in alluding to his love of what we may call the element of the chorus in fiction. It has two sides, one graver, which we shall allude to presently, one lighter, which we may be allowed to touch on here. The chorus was a stately element in the old Greek Tragedy, and the circumstances of its introduction were such as to allow it to preserve dignity while indulging in an almost unlimited sententiousness. Now Meredith, though a reformer, will not be a preacher. The reformer, he feels, to be effective, must go to work more warily, and take the disinclination of his audience into account; which, as the Psalmist has it, hates to be reformed. If, then, the flavour of your Fiction is incomplete without a spice of aphorisms, so that to write a Novel excluding Philosophy is "really to bid a pumpkin caper,"—which nothing but the most piquant sauce could do,—it follows, an acute and honourable minority consenting, that you must introduce this exceptionable yet necessary element by sleight of hand. You will seldom make improving remarks *in propria personâ*, but clearly there will be no objection to representing some grey-headed senior, whose moral seriousness impels him to compose proverbs, and who is without the modesty that might prevent him publishing them; and then, of course, once published they will be common property, and may be quoted to occasion by the other characters in the book: or, if no such scapegoat is forthcoming for the sacrifice,

you may discover the hitherto neglected manuscript of an unknown author, as Carlyle did in his *Sartor*; and Meredith has discovered many. Altogether it seems there is no expedient but is worth a trial to escape the horrid imputation of moralising.

Throughout this book it has been the author's effort to make clear in what direction Meredith's inspiration mainly lies. Even when his inspiration fails him, his writing is so brilliant, that brilliance and versatility of intellect have been generally supposed his chief title to fame. It argues no lack of appreciation of this rich intellectual endowment to say that, when Meredith's achievement is estimated as a whole, it occupies a secondary place. His inspiration appears to lie in his poetic grasp, the intensity of realisation with which he holds to the main issue and keeps it living, in defiance of the tangles of complexity he is for ever weaving every side of it, and which might have been expected to prove fatal to the life within. Again and again you may put your finger on speeches which come neither from character nor situation, but are plainly forced upon both by a critical reaction on the part of their author; and yet the effect of the character itself will not be appreciably marred. It is, in fact, just because the central life is so convincingly represented, that it becomes possible to detect these superficial inconsistencies. And what is true of the characters is equally true of the composition in its wider aspects. In spite of all its twists and turns, its pausing by the way, its return for analysis and counter-analysis, the underflow of passion asserts itself irresistibly, and, once the reader will consent to trust to it, carries him triumphantly along. And it should be remarked that it is in connection with

the minor characters and the comparatively extraneous issues that mistakes most frequently occur. Where Meredith's genius falters—and it falters only in situations that put no tax upon it—his judgment is not always in readiness to give support. It is where his ground is treacherous that he is most secure. Reference was made in our *Introduction* to Meredith's favourite thesis as to a fiction that should be revived by philosophy, and we have just indulged in an allusion to this thesis in one of its lighter aspects. We must attempt to view it more gravely before we close. "Philosophy," says Meredith, "is required to make our human nature creditable and acceptable. Fiction implores you to heave a bigger breast and take her in with this heavenly preservative helpmate, her inspiration and her essence." We spoke earlier of Meredith's partiality for choruses and of one attribute of the chorus in Greek Tragedy. But what, after all, was the main value of the old chorus, if not that it provided, as well by the dignity as by the detachment of its utterances, a spiritual atmosphere, in which the significance of events passing upon the stage could be realised in their relation to a truth outliving them: that it called upon spectators of the tragedy to view the actors and incidents presented to them, not only in their particular, but in their universal aspect, and "heave a bigger breast"? In short, the chorus points us to a high post of vantage at which the visions of poet and philosopher coalesce; and it is Meredith's greatness in his novels that he so often attains to it.





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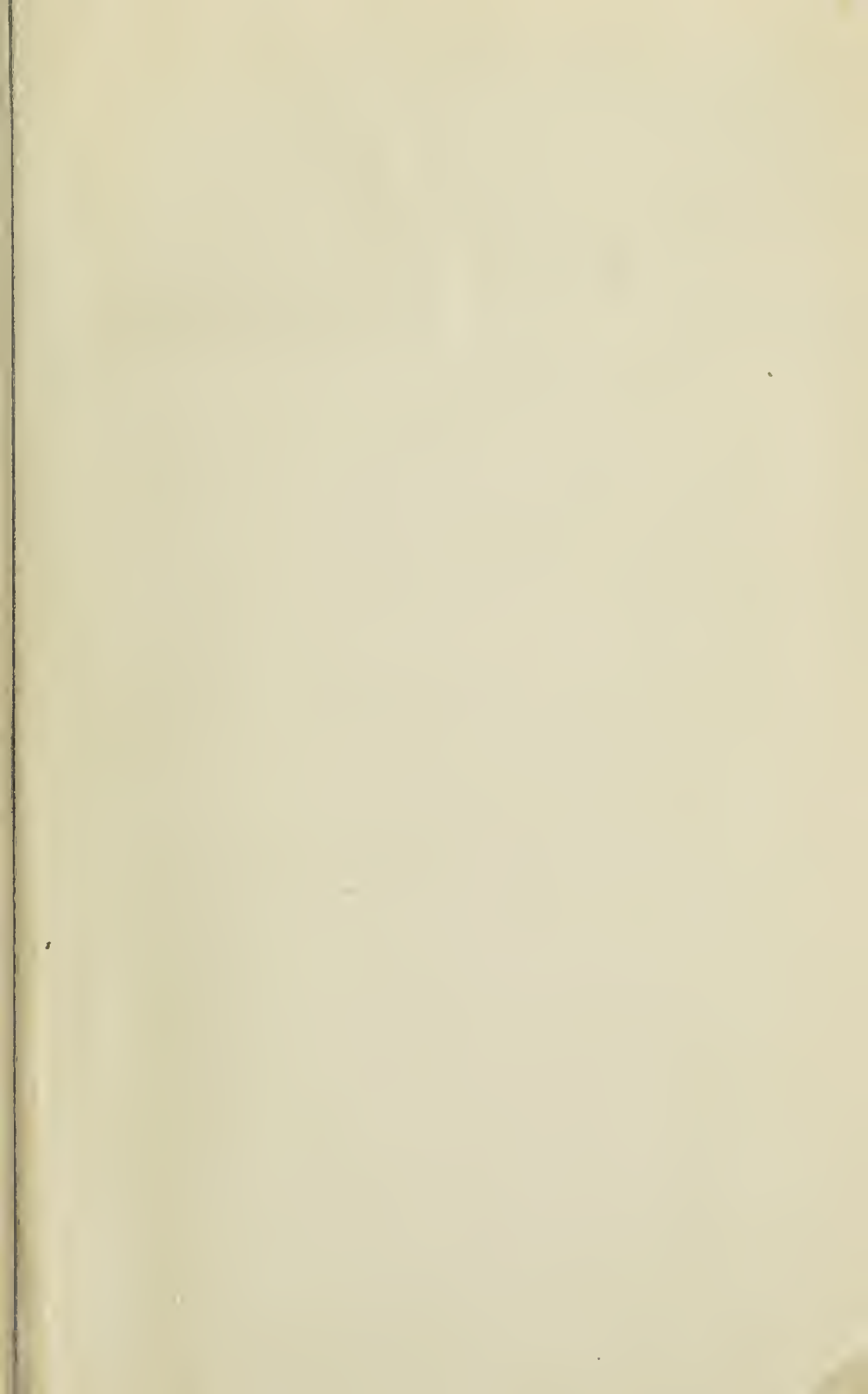
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